



Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

Oral evidence: [Voter engagement in the UK](#), HC 232 Thursday 19 June 2014

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Written evidence from witnesses:

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Members present: Mr Graham Allen (Chair); Mr Christopher Chope; Tracey Crouch; Paul Flynn; Robert Neill; Chris Ruane; Mr Andrew Turner

Questions 436 - 516

Witnesses: **Sue English**, Head of Political Programmes, Analysis and Research, BBC, and **Ric Bailey**, Chief Adviser, Politics, BBC, gave evidence.

Q436 Chair: Good morning, Sue; good morning, Ric. How are you? Welcome. We have an inquiry into voter engagement and this morning we want to talk particularly about the role of the media. Did you want to say anything to start us off, Sue?

Sue English: Yes. First of all, good morning. Thank you for inviting us to come and talk to you. We welcome the chance to give evidence to your Committee as part of the inquiry into voter engagement. Sustaining citizenship in civil society is obviously one of the key public purposes of the BBC and we fulfil that across all our news, political programmes and current affairs output.

A bit of background from me: I am head of political programmes for BBC news, which means I am responsible for BBC Westminster. Many of you know our offices at 4 Millbank. I see many of you in there frequently. We cover all the political news for national, local, English regions, nations' output. We also have a dedicated parliamentary unit, which does *Today* and *Yesterday in Parliament* for Radio 4. We have BBC Parliament, which is one of our 24-hour digital channels and which covers everything that is happening here but also Holyrood, Stormont, Cardiff and the European Parliament. Apart from that, we are responsible for all our election results programmes and I think you may want to talk to me a bit about recent local and European election coverage. We are also responsible for co-ordinating general campaign coverage. Obviously the political programmes output is only part of it because the rest of our news output has a wide range of

political coverage. Many programmes, like *Newsnight*, the *Today* programme, *Question Time*, for example, will all be covering the same issues.

So I am very happy to talk about any of those areas. There are some encouraging audience figures, which make us feel pretty optimistic. Ric Bailey, my colleague, is the Chief Adviser, Politics, and can deal with questions around things like party election and party political broadcasts. So, over to you.

Q437 Chair: Thank you. Before I ask Paul to ask a question I have a general one, and it is really to put you in an even more exalted position than you are in already, which is to speak on behalf of the whole media of the United Kingdom and the globe, but it is a serious question.

We have had a degree of disengagement, or at least a reinforcement of disengagement, because of some perceived and some real behaviours in politics and they need to be reported. Do you feel that to an extent the continued reporting by the media of the downsides of politics has turned a lot of people off; has led to an erosion of support for the whole concept of democracy and voting and participation such that now it is not cool to vote and that you are almost encouraging them? Do you think in certainly the last five or six years—and I am not criticising the way in which it has been reported—the mere fact that there is a daily drip-feed of politics means democracy, Parliament and Government are somehow held in less respect—and respect has to be earned—than it was and that that mix is a contributory factor to disengagement?

Sue English: First, much as I would like to speak for the global media, I think I probably should not and therefore I can only really speak for the BBC news view of it.

Across the board all institutions are subject to greater scrutiny by the public than we have been used to in the past. It is pretty close to home for us as well. All institutions are being questioned by the public about how they fulfil their public duties. Trust is a key issue for all of us. One of the key audience findings that is very important to us is that the BBC remains by far the most trusted news provider by the majority of people; 58% of people will say they trust the BBC as a single source of news and that is much higher than for any of our competitors. ITV come in at about 14%. But you have to earn that trust. We know that. From our point of view we believe that our trust is earned by unbiased, impartial, full, comprehensive, accurate reporting of a range of news stories, of which Parliament and politics is obviously one.

I am less pessimistic than you are. We get a lot of feedback from audiences about our political coverage and about politics in general. Our audiences are encouraging. All broadcast audiences are constantly under pressure because of the increase in digital media but I think our audiences are holding up very well. If you take, for example, the most watched political programme, which is *Question Time*, it is averaging about 2.8 million viewers a week. The edition that went out immediately before the local election results programme on Thursday, 22 May got 3.2 million. That is a very healthy audience at 10.30pm and that is an audience of people who care about politics in the sense that it affects them and their lives, and they care about it because they want to see people being held to account. That may be uncomfortable for all of us but that is part of public service and it is part of our public service remit, I think. So maybe I am just an optimist about these things but I do not think it is quite as grim as you are painting it.

Ric Bailey: Sue and I were both involved in setting up the election debates last time and I did quite a lot of work afterwards on looking at the research into the impact they made, particularly among younger voters.

The engagement of younger voters through the election debates and also of people not normally engaged in politics who perhaps would not have come across election coverage any other way, was

pretty extraordinary. If you look at the turnout figures among young people, the increase was considerably higher than it was amongst the rest of the population. So I think when it is done properly and when politics is shown in the raw as it were I think people will engage with it and, like Sue, I am not as pessimistic as you are. It may feel here as if it would be more under siege but I think engagement in politics generally is not declining.

Q438 Chair: Do you think the style and tone of your reporting, or the media's reporting in general, is cynical and sceptical—which is healthy—but if you listen to Paxman or Nick Robinson or any of those key players who people trust and listen to, that it is coming over as quite cynical?

Ric Bailey: Not cynical, no.

Q439 Chair: Sceptical?

Ric Bailey: Sceptical, yes. Cynical, no.

Sue English: I would underline that. Sceptical is right. We have to be robust in our questioning. Cynical is something that we absolutely do not want to do and I do not think that the BBC does do that.

The other thing that I would say is that there is a huge range of output. Our output can range from the very robust, very forensic interviewing of somebody like Andrew Neil, for example, all the way through to Jeremy Vine on Radio 2, which is a very different kind of tone and way of handling politics and key political issues. So absolutely not cynical from our point of view.

Again, I think it is difficult—it is impossible—for us to talk for the rest of the media. We can only talk for the BBC.

Q440 Chair: But it is never enthusiastic.

Sue English: Oh, I think that is not true. I think it is enthusiastic. We are enthusiastic.

Chair: I am in here so often I must miss those particular programmes.

Sue English: Yes, I think you must have been missing our enthusiastic stories.

Q441 Chair: And you do not think that the way media cover politics can help lead to some disengagement because conventional politics is seen as old-fashioned or not particularly cool and slightly venal? Whereas anti-politics—things that are opposed to conventional politics—have a novelty and an attraction and an entertainment value that a lot of the hard work that does go on in conventional politics cannot bring to bear very often.

Sue English: Again, I do not entirely agree with that. If you look at the audiences we get, for example for BBC Parliament, which is unmediated coverage of the work that is being done in this Parliament and in the other Parliaments and Assemblies that affect the citizens of the UK, it is a good audience and it is people who are just watching the business of the legislatures. I think that is encouraging.

Q442 Paul Flynn: In my view, the BBC is our greatest national institution and I personally owe it a great debt of gratitude from childhood until now. You have quoted the work and duties of the

BBC to sustain citizenship in civil society, which I presume are Reithian words that are chipped out in marble at Broadcasting House somewhere. What do you do to maintain that?

Sue English: For a key element of our part in fulfilling that public purpose you would look at all our coverage of political news on the main bulletins, *News at Six* and *News at Ten* on BBC One—which are getting big audiences and where political news is an absolutely staple part—through to local radio. I am sure many of you are regular contributors to your local radio stations. Local politics is another key part of fulfilling that public remit. The range of output that we do is designed to address audiences of a wide range of people in a wide range of locations across all the issues that they would care about.

Look for example at our recent election coverage—the local and European elections. I think we have sent you some links to our BBC News online site on Vote 2014. There is a huge amount of resource in there about what the issues are; what local councils are; what the European Parliament is; how you vote. There was even quite an interesting dissection of the d'Hondt voting system, which I suspect probably did not get a huge amount of traffic but was nonetheless worth doing. Those resources are available to everybody.

Another encouraging audience figure for us this year is that the user numbers to BBC News online, to that particular site, were 80% up on the same local elections for 2013. That is a fair amount of people accessing quite detailed material online.

That is a range of different output tailored to different audiences.

Q443 Paul Flynn: Do you accept the criticism that your reports on the local government elections before the European elections were announced was distorted by the earlier results to exaggerate the successes of UKIP and to downplay, when the full picture was known, the successes of the Labour party?

Sue English: No, I do not accept that. We have gone back and looked at our coverage and we have looked at all the figures. One of the issues you have to bear in mind is that if you come on air at 11.35pm on election night and you run through, as we did, all the way through the night and then the following day, you are taking results in as they come. Obviously the picture that you have at, say, 2 am is different from the picture that you have the following morning when you have more results in. It is a moving picture.

Q444 Paul Flynn: The London results came in late—

Sue English: The London results came in very late.

Paul Flynn: —and were not favourable but the picture you painted by about 2.00am, when most people had made their impressions, were wondering about the huge UKIP success, which did not in fact happen when the full results were known.

Sue English: Yes, but in a sense you have simply confirmed what I was saying, which is that you report the picture as the results are coming in. At 2 am I think it would be fair to say the results that had come in at that point did show that there was an increase in the UKIP vote. Clearly, as the London results came in, the picture changed. I think you will find—as I say, we did look back on this because obviously some people raised this as an issue with us—that all the way through the overnight programme we were saying very clearly this is a partial picture because only some of the councils are counting overnight and some of the ones that are not counting overnight or are coming in later will change the picture, which they duly did on Friday and which we clearly reported on Friday.

Q445 Paul Flynn: Do you accept the criticism that you and other media are excessively influenced to set the agenda according to the work of the tabloid newspapers? There is great excitement about tomorrow's headlines and today's headlines. We know that the press is very much a right-wing press and has an agenda that is very party political and tends to set the agenda of the day and what the *Daily Express* say in their demented health stories or the *Daily Mail*, in the political bias it always takes, becomes the accepted agenda rather than what has been said even by your own programmes. A BBC documentary might well bring up an issue but it gets far less attention than what is in the headlines in the tabloids today.

Sue English: No, I genuinely do not accept that. We have a very clear editorial process for looking at what the daily news prospects are and making editorial decisions across the board about how we cover them. I can tell you that absolutely we are not driven by anyone else's agenda.

Q446 Paul Flynn: Do you think the most important thing that took place in Parliament yesterday was the complaints of certain miserable people who did not want to be put to air eating their baked beans?

Sue English: I think you are probably referring to the *Yesterday in Parliament* segment on the *Today* programme this morning

Paul Flynn: Yes.

Sue English: Funnily enough, when I heard that I wondered if somebody might want to raise it.

Clearly these are editorial decisions that are taken by the editors of the programmes. There are strong editorial arguments on both sides about what you might have covered from Parliament yesterday. You might have covered PMQs; you might have covered what was actually covered, which was a discussion about BBC cameras' access to the work of MPs in the House. It is an editorial decision, Mr Flynn. We take editorial decisions every day and of course people will disagree with them.

Q447 Paul Flynn: As you know the *Today* programme has a far bigger audience than *Today in Parliament* or *Yesterday in Parliament* and is heard by millions of people. Do you really think that of all the words that were spoken yesterday on subjects of grave importance a matter of this kind, which is of microscopic, protozoan insignificance, by a few bad-tempered MPs, who are not representative at all, should get headlines? If anything is going to damage the opinion of Parliament it is the idea of people moaning about nothing at all, about being photographed in the Lobby, when they might have something of great world importance to say.

Sue English: I think it is an editorial decision. A lot of people would say that making Parliament more accessible to the public is probably quite an interesting subject to discuss.

The other subjects that were discussed in Parliament yesterday have been discussed and covered in a range of our other output but it is ultimately an editorial decision.

Q448 Chair: I think the point Paul is making is that there is this element of trivialising important issues. That is an important issue, how Parliament is covered and how it presents itself; it is certainly an important issue. But when it is treated in a sense of looking for entertainment, rather than exploring important issues, or treating it as novelty, as a throwaway line, then it seems that the BBC, which we all love and want to be an opinion-leader within the media, is dumbing down. It seems a shame when politics and important political issues—what is happening in Iraq right now, for

example—deserve really careful, extended thought and then a popular programme—talking about baked beans; I did not catch the story—but it does not seem as if the BBC is doing itself a lot of favours.

Ric Bailey: Part of engagement is to offer all of our different audiences lots of different things. That means when you are covering Parliament every single day you want to offer a range of different things. We are no longer in a position where you can feed people their greens and say, “This is the most important story; we’re going to give it to you whether you like it or not”. Part of what engaging audiences is, is giving them that variety and colour and engagement in a whole series of things. It is not always necessarily zeroing in on every programme on the thing that is most important.

If you look at the *Ten O’Clock News*, *Prime Minister’s Question Time*, all the things you have talked about, all have had a lot of coverage across our big-audience programmes. A programme that is looking at Parliament wants to give a range of things that are going on, of which this was interesting, perhaps quirky, perhaps something slightly different; that is the sort of thing editors are looking for and their purpose is to engage the audience.

Q449 Chair: It may engage the audience in terms of entertainment, and I am not disputing that. But I think what we are talking about in this inquiry is voter engagement in the political process. I think we do not do ourselves any favours—whether it is baked beans or even PMQs frankly, giving PMQs the level of coverage it gets—I do not know that those editorial decisions are helping what I hope we would all like, which is greater voter engagement. That means more understanding—rather than reinforcing a rather cynical view among people about our democracy—about how the political process, which—maybe with lots of notable exceptions— is by and large there to serve the people. Denigrating that is not going to help the task of this Committee in trying to get voters engaged—how we get voters engaged as well as how we entertain them.

Sue English: Just to come back on that. As you did not hear it I think it is quite important to say it was not a trivial item. I think you would agree that access of cameras to Parliament to film things that have hitherto not been filmed is quite an important issue. So let’s not assume it was trivialised or denigrating in any way. I think there was an editorial decision about the subject that was chosen.

Chair: I am sure we could have another debate about whether fly-on-the-wall is the best way to explain what Members of Parliament elected by the public do. I personally would argue quite strongly that it might be better to follow Members of Parliament in the work they do, not in the Chamber; not in the House of Commons; not even in Select Committees. Ninety per cent of Members’ work is often very directly involved with their constituents, but one would not get that view by listening to the coverage sometimes. I think there is a different argument to be had there about whether people should get access. That is a little bit more like fly-on-the-wall documentary and good luck to you on that one.

Paul Flynn: Most of us are optimistic because of the standing of the person who is doing it and it could well be successful. We have known about fly-on-the-wall reports that have turned out very badly, but I think there is optimism there that it will show parts of Parliament that the public should know about and will find, I think, admirable. We live in hope.

Q450 Chair: Thank you for moving on there, Paul, but we need to get an answer to this, “Does this help voter engagement” question, the coverage in the news. I will come back to you.

Ric Bailey: You use the term “entertain”. The principle on which a lot of the BBC’s success rests is that Reithian principle of educate, inform and entertain and it is the editorial judgments across a

combination of those things that engages the audience. You do not simply inform people by putting out one sort of broadcast. The whole point about editorial judgments is to reach a combination of doing different things to draw the audience in. That is much more true now when people have so much more choice. In the days when they only had one or two channels to go for, you could put one sort of programme on and you would know that you would get a very big audience for it. Now if you want to engage with audiences, you have to find ways of combining those things. That does not mean entertainment is a bad thing; it does not mean that it is cynical; it does not mean that it is denigrating. It means that it is finding ways of engaging with audiences and as a part of that, in the context of Parliament, giving them information about politics and Parliament and so on. I believe very strongly that we do that more now than we have ever done.

Q451 Chair: And you think the balance is right and proportionate?

Ric Bailey: I am not saying we get everything right all the time; of course not. But I am saying that as an objective for covering Parliament and covering politics and accepting that people now have much more choice about where they get that from, the way the BBC does it I think is right

Q452 Chair: Politicians own the largest proportion of the reasons voters are disengaging, in my opinion. Do you accept any responsibility for any voter disengagement in the last five years or so?

Ric Bailey: I do not accept they are disengaging. Voter turnout has gone up at the last two general elections and it went up by a higher proportion—

Q453 Mr Turner: Compared with what?

Ric Bailey: Compared with the one before.

Q454 Mr Turner: 1997? Yes, but 1997 was much higher. It went down.

Ric Bailey: It has gone up in the last two elections. That is all I said.

Mr Turner: Thank you, but you had not said so at the point at which I asked the question.

Chair: Sue and then Paul.

Sue English: Likewise I do not accept that premise. But also I think you have to think of the range of output and the volume of output that the BBC does across politics and all the issues that people care about. If you ask people in audience research, “Do you like political programmes?” their attitude is kind of, “No, not terribly”. If you ask them, “Do you like programmes about education, the health service” whatever, they are engaged and they are interested. Across all our output, from the smallest local radio all the way through to the network bulletins, which are getting millions of viewers, that range of subjects and areas are the things that voters are engaged by. They are not engaged necessarily by a view of politics or a view of politicians; they are engaged by the things that they care about and that affect their families.

Q455 Paul Flynn: A final question. We are all familiar with the very difficult task of making serious politics palatable to a wide audience and how to make it attractive, and what you do is marvellous, I think, on *Democracy Live* and so on; great things going on there.

There is evidence that political debate is moving, and very rapidly, to the Twittersphere and that to get a reaction or some new idea across, political debate is taking place on Twitter now to a greater extent than in any other media and that is almost certainly going to accelerate.

Sue English: The use of Twitter has obviously increased hugely over the last five years. I was told before the 2010 election that it was going to be the Twittersphere election. I don't think it was but I think clearly things have moved on a lot, and the role of Twitter across all news output and all broadcasting has become more important. It is part of the range of different sources of information that people have these days and for the BBC I think it is absolutely right that we have to engage in all those areas. So, yes, our correspondents use Twitter. They use it to communicate with audiences.

But we also use Twitter as a form of news gathering because it very rapidly tells you what is happening, not just here but everywhere else as well. But there are many other sources of social media that are increasingly important and important to audiences that we find it quite hard to reach with our traditional media.

Q456 Paul Flynn: Do you think it would be an improvement if MPs confined their speeches and particularly their questions, to Twitter's 140 characters?

Sue English: Personally, no, I don't think so.

Chair: I think Paul what was going to ask about is that you are surveying the views of non-voters, we understand, to find out why so many people do not vote. Can you give us a brief background?

Q457 Paul Flynn: It is about democratic participation. Do you see a part in the role to increase participation in the voting system; in other political activities? Do you see the BBC doing that?

Ric Bailey: It is absolutely our job to equip voters to take part in parliamentary democracy and to become involved and do absolutely everything we can to make sure people can be fully involved in voting and in democracy generally.

What it is not, it not our job to tell them to go and vote. So we go right up to that line but then we do not push them over and say you now must vote. I do not think that is the role of the BBC.

Q458 Mr Chope: That brings us on to the issue of individual electoral registration, which is now going live. How do you see yourselves fulfilling your role to educate and inform and entertain about individual electoral registration?

Sue English: We have done a fair amount of coverage on changes to voter registration in our news output over the last few months. We have done several BBC News online stories: voter registration to start in 2014 we did at the back end of last year. People have been urged to register to vote using smartphones within the last month. We have also covered this on *Daily Politics* and other political output on television. I am sure we will certainly be doing more on it in the months ahead. So we are covering it as a news story when the opportunity presents itself.

Q459 Mr Chope: Are you going to intensify your activities as we get closer to the election? Or are you just going to keep it on a—

Sue English: We will cover it as a news story. In the last general election in 2010 we provided quite a lot of online information about how to register and then how to vote. We also had some short films that went out on BBC Three, which has an audience that we do sometimes find it hard to reach, which were presented by Robert Peston and which were very clear public information films about how to register and also how to vote. I would absolutely anticipate that we would do that again.

Q460 Mr Chope: Will you extend this to British citizens overseas? There may be as many as 3 million or 4 million people overseas eligible to vote but who are not registered.

Sue English: Yes, interesting point. Certainly they would have access to that information through the website but also of course we do have the World Service and BBC World, which are both global output, and it may well be that it is appropriate to put some information on those outlets as well. That is certainly something to think about.

Q461 Mr Chope: You say it may well be appropriate. That sounds rather tentative. Could you not be a bit more robust? Why should you not do exactly the same for the registration of overseas voters as you are doing for registration of the rest of the voters?

Sue English: I am really saying thank you for pointing that out and I think it is something we will want to look at.

Q462 Tracey Crouch: Did you say the Robert Peston stuff was on BBC Three?

Sue English: Yes

Q463 Tracey Crouch: So what impact will the closure of BBC Three have as a consequence on reaching those audiences that obviously were directly targeted?

Sue English: The BBC Three proposal, which is to move the content of BBC Three online, has still to be agreed by the BBC Trust. So at the moment it is still a proposal only. The timescale for that would mean that it certainly would not happen before the next general election.

Q464 Tracey Crouch: But arguably following the closure of BBC Three, subject to its being approved, it could impact on engaging with voters in specific demographics; that is what you are saying.

Sue English: But it will be available online and also that demographic is covered by, for example, Radio 1's *Newsbeat*, which will have a lot of this kind of information on it and various other outlets that we have. The proposal, as you know, to move BBC Three online is one that a lot of people have concerns about and we understand them but we believe that there are ways that we can compensate for that in other areas.

Q465 Tracey Crouch: I want to move on to party political broadcasts, if I may. Obviously one of the roles of the BBC that directly relates to the terms of reference of this inquiry is your duty to include party political broadcasts in your services. Do you think there are going to be any changes to the rules relating to PPBs or the parties that are entitled to have a party political broadcast before the next general election?

Ric Bailey: Do I think that there should be a change or that there will be?

Tracey Crouch: Both.

Ric Bailey: Okay. Just to be clear, I wear two hats, slightly, with this. I organise PPBs for the BBC but I also chair the broadcasters' liaison group, which brings together all the broadcasters that do PPBs.

There is another slight distinction to be made. "Party political broadcast" is a generic term but we have party election broadcasts, which are obviously the things that go out during an election period and they are very different animals to what we refer to as party political broadcasts, which are the seasonal ones that go out outside election periods. So it depends what you are talking about. If you are talking about what happens in election periods, then that is a very specifically different thing.

Q466 Tracey Crouch: Let's cover both because I think they are both equally important to engaging with voters both during and outside of elections. So in terms of PPBs, then they are incredibly important. Do you think there are going to be changes to the number of parties that are involved?

Ric Bailey: For party election broadcasts we have criteria that for each and every election are set out and are consulted on by the BBC Trust.

The starting point for that is candidates. In other words, you have to bear in mind that if you are going to broadcast across the whole of England, the sorts of parties that are going to get broadcasts must be parties who most people can vote for. It would undermine party election broadcasts if somebody who was only standing in one very small part of England had a broadcast and most people in England could not vote for them. You would then have a lot of broadcasts, most of which did not interest people directly. So there is a threshold and the conventional threshold in general elections is one-sixth. If you are standing candidates in one sixth of the seats available you get one broadcast. On top of that, parties can be given additional broadcasts based on levels of past and/or current electoral support. What that has meant in general elections in the past is that Labour and Conservative had typically, say, five broadcasts. I think at the last general election the Liberal Democrats had four. Those parties that qualify by candidature would have one and then we will make a judgment nearer the time about whether any other parties might get additional broadcasts. For instance in the European elections recently Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrats and UKIP all had the same number of broadcasts, as they did in 2009, based on the level of support they got in the equivalent elections. So it is quite a well-honed system in terms of who gets them. It is looked at every single year. The parties take part in, and are consulted by, the broadcasters' liaison group. The Electoral Commission sits as an observer on it. It is quite a well-honed process. There is lots of consultation. So I would not anticipate any big principle changes in it because it is quite a well-established system.

Q467 Tracey Crouch: So the PEB is basically the easier one of the two. So what about the PPB?

Ric Bailey: No, the opposite actually.

Q468 Tracey Crouch: Well, it is all based on rights and electoral maps so it is pretty much sorted for you. The parties decide how many candidates they are going to put up across the country and therefore that decides the number of election broadcasts they can have.

Outside of a general election, voter engagement is still important and so are the party political broadcasts, so what about that?

Ric Bailey: It is not easy in the sense that we then have to make a judgment about additional support. For instance in the European elections, we obviously made the judgment that UKIP should get the same number of broadcasts as the so-called big parties.

Ofcom for the commercial broadcasters made the same judgment in deciding they were a major party—that is not a definition we use.

The Greens had an additional broadcast based on their European performance. The BNP had an additional broadcast based on their performance in 2009. These are all judgments; it is not just maths.

As you say, party political broadcasts are a different animal. The system has changed a little bit recently—it used to be focused around particular parliamentary events—partly because parliamentary events have moved. The Queen’s Speech obviously is not always as certain as it was; the Budget moves around, and so on. There are different requirements in different nations of the UK; devolution has changed things. So we now have seasonal broadcasts. We have autumn, winter and spring broadcasts for the big parties and we have a set of criteria for who qualifies for that in each of the nations. At the moment in England, typically it is Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrats who qualify based on, first, membership of the House of Commons—parties that have more than one seat in the House of Commons—and additionally whether they have a substantial level of electoral support. So that is the judgment that the BBC Trust made.

In Scotland it will be not just membership of the House of Commons but is also membership of the Scottish Parliament and likewise in the four nations. So we have criteria there and we consult with the parties about that. If and when other parties qualify with those criteria, they too would get party political broadcasts.

Q469 Tracey Crouch: You do not see that changing as a result of perhaps other parties’ success in local and European elections?

Ric Bailey: It would change if they met the criteria.

Q470 Tracey Crouch: At the moment, because they have no presence in the House of Commons then, therefore, they are not particularly entitled to—

Ric Bailey: Not at the moment, no.

Q471 Tracey Crouch: What are the figures for party political broadcasts?

Ric Bailey: We deliberately put them on at pretty well peak time. In terms of our contribution to giving party political broadcasts the opportunity to reach the widest audience and for parties to be able to say and mediate what they want to the public, we put them on at peak time. We put them on at the end of the regional news programmes and just before *The One Show* normally. That is a pretty high audience slot. The regional news programmes are the highest news audiences you get. On average it is about 5.5 million. *The One Show*’s average audience is about 4 million. So they are in that slot then in between. Can I tell you the number of people who are sitting there watching it in between? No, I can’t. But in our terms we are putting it in a slot that gives a pretty big potential audience.

Q472 Tracey Crouch: If I could slightly change tack now and ask about purdah. Do you think that your programmers or editors, your broadcasters at every level of the BBC fully understand purdah?

Ric Bailey: I do not know how long you have but you have hit on my favourite subject. There is no such thing as purdah. I believe purdah means something to do with an Iranian veil or a curtain and implies silence, and I go round in election periods berating people that the one time we should be talking about politics is in election periods. Purdah is an invented idea. We do not have purdah.

Q473 Tracey Crouch: That is music to my ears because in the recent local and European elections, certainly for a national politician talking about national issues it was almost impossible to get on to the local radio, or indeed local regional news, because of their perceived interpretation or view of purdah. In a way, when we are talking voter engagement you want to have confidence that your local BBC stations understand where it is necessary to be applied. We need to basically still be talking to the voting public about key issues, whether it is an election that we are involved in or an election that we are not.

Ric Bailey: I could not agree more. I did 40 workshops all the way round the country beating people over the head making sure they didn't think that. The one thing I would say is that the problem for me is the term "purdah" is used not so much in that context but by local authorities and by public bodies. The massive problem is over-stating it, but a persistent and irritating problem of purdah is the ludicrous interpretations of it in local government and public bodies who will say, for weeks and weeks and weeks before an election, that people cannot talk about anything because of purdah and if you ask them to explain it they have no idea. The guidelines Whitehall puts out about it are perfectly sensible and they are completely misinterpreted. I am not saying local radio stations don't get it wrong because they do, but I work really hard to change that.

Q474 Chair: Do you have a set of guidelines from the BBC, for example, to local radio and regional television about that that could be supplied to Members of Parliament and candidates, so that the next time local radio says, "Love to have you on, Mr or Mrs So and So, but we need the other seven candidates, who are on the ballot paper at the general election, in the studio at the same time before we can discuss nuclear war breaking out between America and China"?

Ric Bailey: I am not saying that is not true. That one is probably a slight exaggeration but I have heard pretty stupid ones. Yes, we have a set of guidelines. As I say, I go round personally, do workshops all the way round the country explaining this to people and any Member of Parliament who is told that, ring me up personally and I can tell you—

Chair: During an election period?

Ric Bailey: During an election period, ring me up and I will clear it up because it is nonsense.

Q475 Tracey Crouch: So next time we are denied the opportunity to engage with our voting public during an election period, we can refer them directly to you, Ric?

Ric Bailey: Yes. People do it all the time.

Q476 Chair: When you send us the guidelines would you please put a suitable mobile phone number?

Ric Bailey: It is on them. It is a public document.

Chair: Thank you, Ric. That is a big help to everybody.

Q477 Tracey Crouch: My final question is about wider political and civic engagement. You very briefly mentioned your role in the last election around the debates. Can you give us any update as to where you think the election debates are going for the next general election, next May, and what impact you think that they had or have on engaging with the public?

Ric Bailey: They were a big success as far as we were concerned, both in broadcasting terms but also in audience engagement terms. As I said earlier, the research looking at what they achieved, particularly with the younger audiences, was really telling so for that reason they were successful. We want to do them again. I looked back at why they had not happened for 50 years and wrote a big paper about it, and the fact that they happened last time should not be underestimated. It is a very difficult thing to achieve, so we should not take it for granted they will happen again. We will and are beginning to work as hard as we can to make sure that happens again, and that is our intention.

Q478 Tracey Crouch: On a scale of one to 10 in optimism, 10 being optimistic, where do you think next year's election debates are—

Sue English: Well Ric and I are both people with a very sunny and optimistic nature. I think they were such an important contribution to the electoral process that I would be very disappointed if they did not happen again, and we will work very hard to make sure that they do.

Tracey Crouch: That did not answer the question.

Q479 Chair: If I can just ask a brief one that I think Tracey might have wanted to cover, which is: does the BBC do enough to distinguish between all-party groups and Select Committees?

Sue English: Yes.

Q480 Chair: I have to say if you have spent, as we have, several years sometimes trying to do a serious report, with a lot of staff resources, a lot of energy from members, and then someone sets up an APPG, with an outside body, a couple of members, knocks out a report of an evening and then it appears the next day as “A group of all-party Members of Parliament”, “A parliamentary report said today” and then something ludicrous, but it has that kudos that drives people in here crazy when we are trying to do serious work, which we think should get at least similar if not much better coverage.

Sue English: Let me answer that. I am sure you are aware of the fact that Select Committees and APPGs are not filmed in the same way. For example, they do not have the same presence on BBC Parliament. We don't report meetings of the APPGs in *Today in Parliament* from Monday to Thursday. We occasionally do on the TV and radio coverage on Friday, but on news value only. We do not receive any TV coverage of them through the normal Bow Tie process of filming committees. So I am pretty comfortable that we are clear that there is a difference here. I take your point that sometimes they are not—in your terms—labelled as clearly as you would like them to be, but I am pretty comfortable that we are on top of that.

Q481 Chris Ruane: In 1987 the differential turnout between the poorest voters and the richest voters was 4%. By 2010 that had gone up to 23%. Now, I am really glad of the coverage that

you have given to IER because I was on two of those programmes: the *Today* programme and *The Week in Parliament*. The profile of the viewers of those two programmes are not the ones who do not turn out to vote, so what more could be done by the BBC to particularly target those groups that are off the register? We have had *Benefits Street*; could we have “Politically Isolated Street” or “No Vote, No Voice Avenue” or “The Politically Demonised Cul-de-sac”? These people are on the bottom of the economic social and political pile, 6 million of them. If they were back on the register it would change the nature and tone of British politics.

Sue English: I think you make an interesting point. Obviously we would like our audiences for all our news and political output to reflect the widest possible range of age groups and members of the UK, but—

Q482 Chris Ruane: Can you get it on to *Eastenders*?

Sue English: I am glad that you think I rule the world in media terms but I cannot get things on to *Eastenders*. But it is a good point.

Q483 Chris Ruane: They do it on *The Archers*.

Sue English: Indeed. I take your point but as I say we do try very hard to get our output across all our audience ranges and I think, certainly in terms of local and regional output, I think that is an area that would potentially be worth looking at. But can I promise you that we will get to those 6 million? No, I can't.

Q484 Mr Turner: What efforts do you make to ensure that your coverage of electoral fraud is covered?

Sue English: I have looked back to see when we have recently done reports on electoral fraud. In fact there was a very interesting Radio 4 *File on 4* in March this year. I do not know whether you heard it or not. I heard it at the time and I have been reminded of it. It looked at claims of organised vote-rigging in 16 areas of England, which the Electoral Commission had identified as being at particular risk of electoral fraud, and it was a very interesting programme. Since then there have been at least two stories that we found on BBC News online on election fraud: one in Derby, one in Tower Hamlets. Going back a few years, ahead of the London mayoral and council elections in 2008 there was a BBC News online guide to how to avoid electoral fraud, which included quite a lot of advice from the Electoral Commission. So this is a story we cover when there is a news story to cover, certainly.

Q485 Mr Turner: What about coverage of young people and black and minority ethnic community views, insofar as they are different from the whole population?

Sue English: We try very hard to reach hard-to-reach audiences and to encourage participation. Some of our output is very good at doing this. For example, Radio 1's *Newsbeat* is reached by more than 1 million 16 to 24-year-olds each week. They do a huge range of issue-based coverage. To give you an example, they did a fascinating piece on the increase in Crohn's disease among people in this age group, and why is it happening and what the effects of it are. They are getting to an audience that programmes like, for example, the *Daily Politics* on BBC Two find it hard to get to. I think they are an important audience for us.

Radio 1 also do a substantial number of documentaries a year. For example, they have recently one done called *My First Vote*, which specifically looked at young people in Scotland, ahead of the Scottish referendum, because of the first time voting for 16 and 17-year-olds. BBC Three still have a fair amount of current affairs focused at this age group, so they do a programme called *Free Speech*, which is a live debate and discussion programme. You may remember that in the run-up to the 2010 election they did a *First Time Voters' Question Time*, which was essentially the question time format but designed for BBC Three.

So those kinds of programmes do aim to get to that audience. We also have a number of outreach projects that are fairly important in this area as well. The BBC's *School Report*, for example, gets to around 30,000 11 to 16-year-olds in around 1,000 schools across the UK, which encourages them to be interested in journalism and news and to use the skills that we can help them with to engage with that.

Q486 Mr Turner: Quite recently we have seen reports that the worst examination results are among the white working class. What are you doing for them?

Sue English: Again, our audiences are varied across a different range of our output. That particular group of people do tend to listen to Radio 1 and they do tend to listen to *Newsbeat*. It is also a Radio 5 Live audience. You pick up these people in different forms of output, and also obviously in terms of online coverage where a lot of younger people are more active.

Q487 Mr Turner: I assume you think your coverage about immigration and the European Union has become more representative, I would say, since about 2010. Do you think that was fair 10 years earlier?

Ric Bailey: I do not have it in front of me but I think the BBC has already said that there were elements of that story—and I don't think it was just the BBC and I don't think it was even just the media, perhaps Parliament itself—and I think there were elements of that where we were a bit slow to talk about it. I think the BBC takes its responsibility for that as much as anybody else did. As you say, I think that is something, particularly through some of these other different outlets where there is quite a close interaction with the audience and we do pick up these things more quickly through social media than perhaps we used to, where we are more responsive and able to feed back into the general debate; that sort of thing is happening. In general terms, I think we are less likely to miss it now than perhaps we were 10 years ago because we are perhaps better engaged in talking to audiences than we were in the past. I think that is a pretty good example of it.

Q488 Mr Turner: What was the position in 2008?

Ric Bailey: It is difficult to say what the position was in 2008. If you want to put it into the political sphere somewhat, my sense is that one of the things the BBC did in the past was to allow its political coverage to be dominated by Westminster, to the extent that it sometimes missed things that were happening outside. Some people saw that as a bias. I think it was the focus not always being right; the gravitational pull of Westminster and our agenda that you talked about earlier. Westminster dominated our agenda. It still does to a great extent, but I think we are more open to pulling in agendas from elsewhere, and social media helps that, I think; for instance, the rise of UKIP. Because they weren't representative Westminster may have been behind the curve in that 10 years ago, or even five years ago, because of the way we represented politics. I think that has fundamentally changed in the past five years.

I am not sure I would be able to place where 2008 was but if you think back to our reaction to what happened in the 2009 European elections, when UKIP did very well and the BNP won two seats, again applying entirely consistent criteria about what that meant for politics. You may remember the furore over Nick Griffin appearing on *Question Time*, for instance. It was an attempt to look across and listen to those voices and represent them more. That is not to denigrate what was happening in Westminster, but I do think there was a tendency to only see politics and balanced impartiality through Westminster. Therefore there was a danger of missing what was happening outside. Certainly the last five years or so—I could not give you an exact timescale—we have been pretty conscious of that and try not to fall into that trap.

Sue English: To underline what Ric is saying, I think for all of us the issue of impartiality is about the breadth of voices that you get across a range of different output. I feel that we are in a better place now on that than we were perhaps 10 years ago.

Chair: Chris, do you want to go back to electoral fraud?

Q489 Chris Ruane: Yes. Andrew's question on the proportionality of coverage. I can give you the statistics. Since 2010 there has been one successful prosecution for postal ballot fraud. Since 2008 there has been one successful public prosecution for electoral registration fraud. Two cases. But 37% of the public believe electoral fraud is a problem. The causes are: press and media coverage; Ministers banging on about it and even the Electoral Commission themselves. Do you think that the BBC may have heightened the concern out there with the public? Yes, one case is bad, two cases is twice as bad and damaging to democracy, but having 6 million people missing off the register is of far greater damage to British democracy. Do you have the balance right?

Sue English: As I said before, we cover these stories as news stories. For example, when the Electoral Commission makes a statement about electoral fraud we are likely to cover it.

Chris Ruane: But one case.

Sue English: I think, yes, the answer to your question is I do think we have the balance right.

Chair: A last one then, Andrew.

Q490 Mr Turner: You are saying that 6 million is a significant figure, and I accept that, but you seem to be saying 3 million, which Chris Chope has just mentioned, is something on which you may have thoughts. Does that not imply that you have not got to the point where Chris thinks things are important, whereas what Chris Ruane is saying is there is a need to get these people on the register?

Sue English: To go back to Mr Chope's point. I think it is a very well made point and I am saying I am very happy to take it away and look at it because honestly it is not something that I had thought of. I am absolutely across individual voter registration in this country. I was not aware that it was an issue. I will take it away and look at it.

Chair: Sue, Ric, thank you very much. In a sense I don't quite feel we got to where I wanted to get us to, in terms of getting your help to acknowledge that there is a problem out there about voter engagement and that it is a very serious problem. The Committee is doing a very serious review about it, and I am not blaming you and I am certainly not blaming the BBC or the media but how can the media help us re-engage to a much greater degree and tackle the cynicism and disillusionment with democratic politics and conventional politics that is clearly out there now? Perhaps that is something we need to all keep thinking about and have another chat about. Of course you are absolutely entitled

to pop in any additional thoughts that you have to make me even happier than I am now. Thank you so much for coming in this morning.

Sue English: Thank you.

Chair: Thank you for your time.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Damian Lyons Lowe**, Chief Executive, Survation, **Patrick Brione**, Director of Research, Survation and **Fran O’Leary**, Director of Strategy and Innovation, Lodestone, gave evidence.

Q491 Chair: We are going to move on now to our next set of witnesses, and that is Damian and Fran. Damian Lyons Lowe, Chief Exec from Survation. Damian will be joined this morning by Patrick Brione, Director of Research—I hope I have pronounced that well, Patrick—and Fran O’Leary, Director of Strategy and Innovation at Lodestone. Would you like to say anything to start us off or are you happy to start straight into questions with Paul?

Fran O’Leary: I would like to kick off if that is okay.

Chair: Please do, Fran.

Fran O’Leary: First, I would like to thank the Committee for inviting us to come today.

Chair: You are very welcome.

Fran O’Leary: I think it is a real privilege to get to come and hear what you are interested in and hopefully help. Secondly, I would like to commend the Committee on looking at this area. I think it is one of the biggest and most difficult issues to grapple with in politics and in democracy today. Thirdly, I would also like to commend the extensive work that I have seen that Chris has done over time to interrogate this issue and look at it from a whole range of different angles. I have tracked his work over time.

Fundamentally, the reason why we are here is that when I returned from helping the Democrats in Las Vegas in 2012, where they had a huge success in increasing voter registration and turnout, I began looking at why people don’t vote. When I came back to the UK I was struck by the fact that the majority of the people that I know don’t vote, and it hammered home. I became curious about why that was when we had had the same education and grown up in similar ways with the same values. That is the kind of outcome that is there.

I began doing Google surveys doing Facebook ads to try to reach the unreachable people who Sue was talking about earlier, and found that it was incredibly easy to reach them and find out what they were thinking. So my company Lodestone commissioned Survation, who are a polling company, to conduct the Lodestone political survey, which was a major review of what voters and non-voters think. We also benefited from the analysis of Stuart Fox from the University of Nottingham, who has looked at our research in detail—and I hope to cover some of his points today—and also through engagement with Gurchetan Grewal at the University of Birmingham.

We found that many, many non-voters share the same great British dream that voters have and that they are very similar in a lot of ways, which is one reason why Lodestone recommends that at every point when voters engage with the council they should be invited to register to vote, basically as a more efficient common-sense approach to voter registration, where it is just more of the part of the mechanics of government on a daily basis.

Secondly, one of the striking things we found was that the majority of voters, the majority of non-voters, and the majority of young non-voters all said that they would be more likely to vote if they could vote online. We think this is a statistic that should not be ignored, and we believe that there should be closer interaction between Government, industry and academics to ensure that any internet voting systems that are developed are safe, secure and economical. Indeed, I believe there probably should be further trials on this in future given the pace of change and development within technology. It is incredible, and we benefit from having some of the leading academics and leading technologists in this country. I would like to hand over to Survation just to outline their part in this process.

Damian Lyons Lowe: Survation is a market research political polling company with a particular focus on political and social research. Going back to Fran's original point about how you reach the unreachable, where do we get these people from? We are consistently polling members of the public. We do something like 1,000 interviews with different individuals over the course of a year. We have vast amounts of data on people who tell us that they don't vote, in this case defined by not voting in 2010.

So for Lodestone we were able to do what is called a re-contact study, where we could re-contact the database of declared non-voters and double confirm that they were, indeed, being not disingenuous in the first place. We then took 1,000 of those non-voters and 1,000 voters and looked at the different characteristics and trends between the two groups. Generally the panels that we draw respondents from are large and unbranded. They are not political. The respondents are paid a small cash incentive to answer polling questions. There are a lot of people who are not interested in politics and they are well represented on these panels. They are typically doing surveys comparing brands of cereal or washing powder. These are not politically engaged people. So we think we managed to find these hard-to-reach people using that method.

If there are any questions about the survey methodology, Patrick might give us some information, or do you want to ask questions?

Chair: We will press on.

Q492 Paul Flynn: Ms O'Leary, did your research convince you that we need to change the system or do you need to acquire a new circle of friends if they don't vote?

Fran O'Leary: That is a tough question. It convinced me, first, that more research should be done; secondly that the majority of non-voters who we have come across are not strange beasts who never engage with society or do not engage with their neighbours, a different breed, and that many of the values policy areas and beliefs that they hold are incredibly similar to those of voters. The thing I was struck by, both since publishing the research and publishing several articles, was the number of people I have spoken to who have said they don't really know how to get on the register. That is not because they are not enthused about the world, it is that they do not know about the system and I think we should do more.

Q493 Paul Flynn: Are they Russell Brand groupies, these friends of yours?

Fran O'Leary: It is right to say that some of the people surveyed did say, when we asked them who they would like politicians to be more like, they would like politicians to be more like Russell Brand but the person—

Chair: Be careful what you wish for.

Fran O’Leary: Absolutely; absolutely. The person more people referred to was Richard Branson, and I would not categorise the majority of the people who we have surveyed who are non-voters as people who are Russell Brand groupies at all. They are much more like everyone else in your constituencies, the sort of thing you would expect.

Q494 Paul Flynn: Do you think it would be beneficial to have people on the electoral roll deciding the choice of who runs the country, who have so little interest or understanding of serious affairs generally?

Fran O’Leary: I think it is wrong to categorise them as people who have little interest in the running of the country. From the verbatim responses, we have definitely seen that they are very interested in issues like how their kids are schooled, or making sure that they have access to more housing, concerns about debt—things that Parliament deals with. For some reason there is a disconnect between the two, but I would not say they should not have a vote, absolutely not.

Q495 Paul Flynn: We are trying to get Mr Brand along. It has been suggested that he come along to talk to us because I would like to greet him as a fellow campaigner to legalise drugs. In my case I have been campaigning since before he was born. But to tie this up with his contradictory advice that he wants to change things but you don’t vote. What we see is a Government who are obsessively interested in elderly, rich people, like me, who have a great many undeserved benefits and young people are constantly being punished by having their vanishing benefits cut. Isn’t that a consequence? People of your generation and this inert group of sad friends you have, why be angry?

Fran O’Leary: I feel that is a very sad picture but on that front I would like to refer to some of the research that Stuart Fox at the University of Nottingham did on younger people who are non-voters.

Damian Lyons Lowe: From the data set.

Fran O’Leary: He found both with the voters and non-voters within the younger end that one of the barriers to voting was they said they did not feel that they had enough information or understanding. I think that is an issue that all of us involved in this kind of thing have to address. Secondly, one of the points he pulled out was that their media engagement is slightly different to those of older people, and the role of Facebook in campaigning should not be underestimated or underused as a tool. Facebook and the family were important to them whereas traditional newspapers less so. I think everyone in politics can learn from that.

Q496 Paul Flynn: We were outgunned on this because Russell Brand has 7 million followers, which is even more than members of this Committee have. We have a few thousand followers. In the whole of the political set very few political figures have more than a few thousand followers. Do you think there a lesson in there, with the result of your research suggesting that we should be more engaged in social media?

Fran O’Leary: I absolutely do but I also think it is about both what content we share on social media and which channels we use. When we looked at Facebook and Twitter, for younger people within that breakdown Facebook was a bigger source of political news— however you define political news to them—than Twitter was. Anecdotally, I know a lot of politicians who concentrate far more on Twitter than on Facebook. I would say that if you want to engage with younger voters it is probably worth focusing on both.

Paul Flynn: Thank you.

Chair: Thanks, Paul. I will move from Russell Brand's press agent to Tracey.

Tracey Crouch: Who has 9,000 followers on Twitter.

Chair: And growing.

Q497 Tracey Crouch: And growing. I will start by asking you about the survey and its methodology if I may. One of the problems that we have faced throughout this inquiry is reaching people who are not politically engaged and to find out why they don't vote. How were you able to reach such a large number of non-voters?

Patrick Brione: To pick up on the point that Damian raised earlier about how we conducted the survey; the survey was split into two parts. So we had a sample of voters who obviously are people that normally answer surveys about voting intention and so on. Then we had a sample of non-voters. The non-voters sample we managed to select by going back to people that we had already spoken to over the preceding year, who had filled in surveys on a range of topics, many political, some not political. We draw these people from online panels, where they have basically signed up to do surveys and they are paid a small amount of money for five or 10 minutes of their time on each occasion. Because most of the surveys that people are offered on these sites are not political in their nature—they are more about commercial branding, less political issues than we would normally expect in political opinion polls—there is no reason why politically disengaged people would not be present in equal numbers to politically engaged people in these groups.

Q498 Tracey Crouch: So it is a representative sample in other words?

Patrick Brione: It is a representative sample in that sense.

Damian Lyons Lowe: Yes, and you might want to mention, for example, the weighting procedure that you went through.

Patrick Brione: We drew a sample of non-voters and a sample of voters. Then we weighted the overall sample to be nationally representative by age, by gender, by region of the UK and also by income. So we made sure that there was a correct number of low-income groups in there who we know are much more likely to be non-voters than people of high-income groups. In that sense, the respondents were representative of the UK and included that very large number of people that did not vote.

The way that we drew them into the survey was that we didn't make it about politics to start with. There was no mention of voting or politics in the introductory text or in the email invitation that was sent to them. The initial questions in the survey were all about very general topics. So we started the survey in a very soft manner. We asked people about their hopes for the future, about where they got their news from—general questions like that—and then we only got into whether they vote and why they don't vote, if they don't vote, later on in the survey once they were already engaged with it.

In that sense we would think that we have managed to capture and retain the number of non-voters that we were looking for.

Q499 Tracey Crouch: Included in that survey were people who were either too young to vote or ineligible to vote, and therefore it is unsurprising that they are non-voters because they are unable to vote. So I am interested as to why that is therefore included within the results of the survey.

Damian Lyons Lowe: We have broken that out for you.

Patrick Brione: The sample does include some people who were too young to vote in 2010. I have looked at the actual data: there were 88 such respondents out of the 1,020 people that didn't vote in the last election; 88 of them were too young or gave "too young" as their reason for not voting. That is 8.6% of the non-voters' sample. Had these voters been old enough, based on the actual turnout rates at the last general election it is estimated that only 44% of them would have voted anyway. That figure comes from work that Ipsos Mori did, around the time of the last general election, on differential turnout among different demographics. They were included in the survey largely because we thought it would be interesting to include them, to look at the views of people with probably more than a 50% chance that they were going to turn out to be non-voters next time. Therefore, we thought their views would be of interest in looking at how to engage these people to make sure that they do vote for the 2015 general election.

Fran O'Leary: It is probably worth adding that when we analysed the data for people who did not vote in 2010, and who say they would not vote if there was an election tomorrow, and who also say they haven't voted in a local council or European election—so just those people, the absolute, absolute non-voters who at that point I might expect them to say some things that are slightly more Russell Brand-ish—their data on pretty much every point mirrored that of people who did not vote in 2010.

Patrick Brione: A very large proportion of the people that were non-voters, in that they had not voted in the last election or who said they would not vote in the next election—I think 54% of them—over half of those 1,020 non-voters said they had never voted in a general election, including 23% of those aged 55-plus. They must have missed at least eight general elections consecutively. So these are people that are very, very persistent non-voters many of them.

Q500 Tracey Crouch: Minus the 88 too young or ineligible, did your survey ask whether or not the non-voters were registered to vote?

Damian Lyons Lowe: No, we did not ask that question. It is a very interesting area to explore in future surveys. We looked at this. Ros Baston who was formerly a legal adviser at the Electoral Commission has highlighted that around half of the people, if you ask them if they were registered to vote, think they are registered to vote but are in fact not registered to vote. That is 56% of private renters who are not registered to vote if you surveyed them are unaware that they are not registered to vote.

Patrick Brione: In that sense it is not necessarily reliable as a survey question to ask: "Are you registered to vote?" because we know that the figures that come back are not actually reflective of reality.

Tracey Crouch: Great. As a geeky psephologist, my questions are done and answered. Thank you.

Q501 Mr Chope: The views of non-voters as to why they did not vote, they were perfectly legitimate reasons, weren't they?

Patrick Brione: Absolutely, yes.

Q502 Mr Chope: So we are not criticising them for reaching these conclusions?

Damian Lyons Lowe: There was nothing toxic or strange in terms of the way that people think about the world, their hopes and dreams or their views on policies. That is fair.

Q503 Mr Chope: The refrain that parties and candidates are all the same and that their votes will not make any difference, which reflected more than half, that is a fair comment, isn't it?

Fran O'Leary: I think that is a very unfair question.

Q504 Mr Chope: Let's put it a different way. Your survey identified various people who people thought they would prefer to have as their representatives, people like—ironically and probably to the embarrassment of Paul Flynn—the Queen. People volunteered the Queen as being somebody they thought that would be an ideal representative for them. They also gave a lot of prominence of Boris Johnson. He is the only living politician who was identified. Can you explain why you think Boris Johnson came into that reckoning?

Fran O'Leary: On that point, we did not ask a supplementary about why they selected the particular people they did. It was open; they could suggest anyone they wanted. We stated, "Please put non-political figures" and Boris Johnson and Nelson Mandela made it into the list. I am curious about whether there is a case that some people somehow manage to transcend politics and communicate with people on a different level. We also asked people open questions about what they wanted their life to be like in 2020, what they wanted Britain to be like in 2020 and also what, if anything, they disliked about politics.

The thing that was clear to me from there was that the word that came up the most often in the dislike list was the word "lies" or the concept that truths are not always told or that promises are not always carried out. On the positive front about the future there was a very clear sense that they believe in a great British dream, one that I think none of you would find surprising in terms of what they want. They want to be able to own their own homes, be debt free. They want to be safe and secure. They want a better life for their children and for the grandchildren. Some of them are concerned about the EU. Some of them are concerned about immigration. None of this will be a great surprise. So the thing for me is how do those who are in politics tackle the issue on trust and, secondly, on ensuring that politics, from whatever party communicates that parties do want the same great British dream that people want, whether they are voters or not. I think there are challenges there. There are mechanical challenges but there are also political challenges there to cross those barriers. I believe their views are legitimate but it is up to them what they do.

Q505 Mr Chope: From what you have just said, it sounds as if they should be voting Conservative. But why is Boris Johnson so special in this context?

Fran O'Leary: I think there is a point about him, in that he does get an incredibly large amount of air time and he does do a lot more media than some other politicians do. If you look at the programmes he appears on, they are not always the ones that Chris mentioned earlier that are viewed by the top strata in society. They are also ones with a slightly more populist appeal, and perhaps there is a case for politicians to think a little more about that and also the language they use and how they come across.

Damian Lyons Lowe: To respond to your point that they sound like Conservative voters, the voting intention among this group of non-voters was approximately—

Fran O'Leary: Of the 56% of those who did not vote in 2010 who said they would vote if there is an election tomorrow, I think around 32% said they would vote Labour, which was the largest

grouping and something like 15% said Conservative. Something like 18% said UKIP and 22% said undecided. A very low number said Lib Dems.

Patrick Brione: We also asked them the simple question: if you had to choose would you rather have a Labour-led Government or a Conservative-led Government, and of the non-voters sampled 35% said Labour, 21% said Conservative and 44% said “Don’t know”.

Q506 Mr Chope: So do you think this is why Labour politicians are so obsessed with this particular subject matter because they think that there are a lot of—

Paul Flynn: It is about democracy.

Damian Lyons Lowe: They were talking about people in lower socio-economic groups. They were talking about people who are younger. They are much more likely to be Labour supporters.

Patrick Brione: I don’t think anyone would be surprised that people in the lower socio-economic groups or young voters are, on average, more likely to be Labour supporters than Conservative.

Fran O’Leary: I would argue that it is something that I believe everyone involved in politics should be concerned about, because it is an issue of democracy. I am personally worried that we have a generation coming through who may not vote at all, and what does that mean in terms of our stability as a democracy and the legitimacy of Parliament?

Q507 Mr Chope: I do not disagree with that. Can I just ask you this? You said that 84% of your respondents and 56% of non-voters said that they would probably have voted if there was a general election held tomorrow, so half the people who say they are non-voters would actually vote. Is that something we should be quite sceptical about?

Damian Lyons Lowe: Absolutely. You have addressed that, haven’t you?

Patrick Brione: Yes. Pollsters have been aware for a very long time that when you ask people in surveys whether they are likely to vote at the next general election people greatly over-exaggerate their chances of voting. This is something that the polling industry people are very aware of and people make corrections for this all the time as standard. So in this study 84% said they would vote in a general election tomorrow, including a majority of those that did not vote in the last election. We know for a fact that turnout has not reached 84% since 1950, so the chances of it doing so in the next general election I think it is fair to say are slim to none.

As a comparison, for example, in terms of what proportion with the discounters, we did a final poll for the recent Newark by-election, which we did 48 hours before polling day. In that poll 64% of the representative sample of people we spoke to in the constituency said they were 10 out of 10 certain to vote in the election, and actually the turnout in that by-election was 52%. So, even people that say they are definitely going to vote—100% sure—in practice when it comes to it they don’t. The reasons for this are likely to be a number of things. Partly it is a case of a person taking the survey, giving the answer they think people want to hear; partly is they perhaps feel guilty about the fact that they are a non-voter and like to give the answer how they imagine themselves to be rather than how they actually are, and I think partly it is a case of people who perhaps have a genuine intention when you ask them. They think, “Yes, I would like to vote” but when it comes to the day they failed to consider that they might forget or they might just not feel bothered on the day or they might get distracted.

Damian Lyons Lowe: It is a known issue and some pollsters even look at your stated intention to vote when they are looking at the data—look at if you did vote in 2010 and apply a significant discount to your real intention to allow for that factor.

Patrick Brione: That is the reason why we structured this research around people that did not vote in the last election rather than around people that say they won't vote in the next election, because the former is an actual definition based on reality, casting a vote is something that you can measure and we know represents the truth of whether you are going to or not.

Damian Lyons Lowe: What is interesting is that there is no reason in these sorts of polls for people to tell you that they are not going to do something, because they feel like they are going to be screened out of the survey because it is not going to be suitable for them. So you pretend that you are going to do something in online surveys because you are worried you are not going to get your pocket money for finishing the survey. Saying, "I did not vote in 2010" it is almost certainly the case.

Patrick Brione: Those will be honest, genuine people that did not vote.

Mr Chope: Thank you very much.

Chair: Andrew, did you want to come in or are you about to disappear—

Mr Turner: No, that is answered.

Chair: Chris, I know you were interested in that area.

Q508 Chris Ruane: The Electoral Commission are proposing to introduce photo ID before people can vote in 2019 because the public are scared about the issue of fraud. I gave the statistic before. One case for electoral registration fraud since 2008, so the Electoral Commission acted on this and want to impose photo ID even before IER comes into place next year. Fran, you said you have been over to America, you have seen the American system. In America it is the right-wing Republican states that have introduced voter ID as part of a voter suppression policy. Do you think if the independent Electoral Commission introduce this it will improve voter turnout for the poorest in society?

Fran O'Leary: I definitely don't and I am concerned about that move. What I saw in Las Vegas was the way they increased turnout there was to increase turnout among people who are defined as black or Latino. Among those communities many of them had never voted before and many of them were concerned that if they registered to vote they might get deported or they might get hassled from the state in another form. Whether that is rational or irrational there were concerns about filling in forms and how to do it properly, all of those issues.

In the UK, when I have engaged with people about voter registration, I have heard numerous times that people are concerned about the form, the fear associated with it. There are some of those similar kinds of fears out there. I am concerned that adding another barrier to registration could deter more people, who are not necessarily engaged in form filling and issues like that, from doing so.

If I can finish quickly, in my written evidence I have referenced some of the ways we can potentially increase registration in the UK—and some of that was inspired by an article by John Spellar, another MP, and also by the leader of Sandwell Council—some very easy, cheap solutions that councils can employ to increase voter registration. I believe that there are probably other great examples from around the country from different councils that I don't know about, which could also be drawn together to create best practice to increase rather than deter. I think that is what the

Electoral Commission's focus should be on. Frankly, the fact that registration is so low at the moment, when bureaucracy could be armed to do it better, is a disgrace.

Damian Lyons Lowe: I don't know the statistics but I think the Commission's own data is that fraud as a proportion of elections is very low. Just on individual voter registration, in terms of that being a challenge to this topic, in 2012 there was a Department for Work and Pensions pilot scheme, which was trying to match their data to the register data. They found that only 82% of their own data matched that of the register. So there is a risk with IER that the register becomes further skewed to people with stable addresses and employment. Private tenants are the lowest level of voter registration at 56%. They are often the people that are harder to reach, more volatile, more moving around, lots of flats type of people. The register has a risk of being skewed to an older, stable, more established group of people and the nature of the electorate will change.

Q509 Chris Ruane: Finally, another measure that the Electoral Commission are proposing is to restrict political parties handing out and collecting postal ballot registration forms. Now 50% of people who voted in the Police and Crime Commissioner elections were postal voters. In 2009 you were twice as likely to vote in the European elections if you had a postal vote. Again they are putting forward these proposals because of the huge concern in the public, despite the fact there has only been one successful prosecution since 2010. What effect do you think this limitation on political parties to connect with their voters, not for them to put postal votes, will have on voter turnout? Will it improve it or will it make it worse?

Fran O'Leary: Honestly, I am very concerned about that. I just think their focus should be on what they can do to increase as opposed to adding more barriers into the system. We know that postal votes are incredibly useful for people who have busy lives. We know that is one of the reasons why people suggested to us that they are interested in internet voting. I think to take away one mechanism of people on the ground being able to help their friends or people they have met to sign up, whether they are a member of a political party, I think it is a mistake. I do not understand the logic behind it.

Damian Lyons Lowe: We thought that one of the surprising conclusions—something that Fran has mentioned—was there were a lot of very similar concerns about issues between the two groups and their hopes and their attitudes to various issues. I think it is very important to look at ways to connect issues into the political system. Severing a link like that could risk that ability to connect with the voter. We relate that to politics because we have a disconnect between things that people care about and a political party. I think you make a valid point.

Patrick Brione: One quick thing on that, from our poll when we asked non-voters what their main reason was why they did not vote, as well as the large number that said things like, "I don't believe my vote will make a difference" and so on, there were 9% that said they were not able to access a polling station or get a postal ballot as their main reason. That is a small portion but I think it is still a significant number of people that said they have obstacles in some way and they perhaps are a separate group of non-voters that need separate measures to address their—

Chris Ruane: The Electoral Commission's own survey says 96% of people with postal ballots are happy with them.

Chair: Paul, come in, yes.

Q510 Paul Flynn: Very briefly on the interesting questions raised by Christopher and the Royals. I understand that Prince William is the most popular of the Royals, more popular than the

Queen and far more popular than Prince Charles. Boris Johnson is certainly popular, and the picture that most of us have of him is of being stranded on a wire waving two little Union Jacks. Nigel Farage had a huge amount of negative publicity but did very well in the elections. Can you conclude from that in your studies that political popularity depends on the volume of publicity rather than the quality of the publicity?

Chair: One-word answers, please.

Fran O’Leary: On the basis of our study I don’t think we can comment on that.

Patrick Brione: I don’t think we have any data to confirm or deny that.

Damian Lyons Lowe: I think the further you can disconnect a politician from politics then they can speak to the people who feel that they are disconnected from politics.

Q511 Chair: So it is about depoliticising our democracy.

Fran O’Leary: No.

Patrick Brione: I wouldn’t want that for you.

Q512 Chair: Is that not a logical conclusion from what you have said?

Fran O’Leary: I don’t think so. I don’t think at all. My view, on the basis of what we have seen is that there is a problem in connecting parties to the great British dream. Perhaps that is a problem on the basis of how parties communicate, what they are communicating, but they need to be communicating to the absolute core of what people want and not ignoring the things that they say, whether that is about getting the UK out of the EU or the other issues raised.

Q513 Chair: You may want to connect, you may wish to communicate, but if your message is mediated on a daily basis you often cannot, despite every possible effort, talk to people about serious political issues because of the mediation between you and the electorate.

Damian Lyons Lowe: Survation with a partner were piloting some methods to engage non-voters to register to vote and for voters to participate in politics using data to personalise communications with potential voters, so getting the issue connected to doing something about it and voting for a party, and how do you personalise that and make it relevant to the person, rather than a broadcaster. One thing I want to strongly suggest is that if there is a major Government initiative, or any initiative, with funding that encourages the public to vote that whatever ideas transpire the Government should use commercial market research techniques, in the same way that the advertising industry and the marketing industry use, to consider: what is the best way to do this? What are the best messages? What is the most effective way? Not just splurging a lot of money on an issue but trying to do some research on what would be the most effective way to reconnect to these people.

Chair: There are two questions there. One is about Government and the other is about Parliament and they are two separate institutions. If you want Members of Parliament to communicate more directly they will need the facility and resource to do that and then people will need to say that it is appropriate that they have that resource, rather than, “There they go again. They are getting more money for themselves”, which is often a mediated view of whenever people do try to communicate

more effectively. Everyone round this table has had that experience. Even something as low grade as an annual report going to every constituent became a big issue that Members of Parliament were somehow abusing the system. So there is a bit of an education job to take place there as well perhaps.

Anyway, before we finish Tracey was very keen to come in.

Q514 Tracey Crouch: I want to follow up something Damian said. Did you guys see *Voter Man* from Denmark? Did you see the video that was put together by the Danish Parliament to try to encourage young Danish folk to get involved?

Fran O’Leary: I haven’t seen that video.

Damian Lyons Lowe: I haven’t seen it.

Q515 Tracey Crouch: It was banned because it was rather obscene in parts, but the principle of the video was to get people to register to vote for the European elections, and the consequences of what could happen. I would encourage you to look at it. It is not banned on YouTube, but—

Damian Lyons Lowe: Was this the wake up in the morning argument?

Tracey Crouch: Yes.

Damian Lyons Lowe: Okay.

Q516 Tracey Crouch: You have not seen it but my question was going to be was do you think in principle that is the sort of thing that we should be doing, not the obscene content but the actual principle of getting that cartoony-type message out to the younger generation to register to vote because if not these are the consequences?

Damian Lyons Lowe: I think everything should be tested. However controversial or wacky they might sound they should be tested.

Patrick Brione: Certainly coming up with as wide a range of ideas as possible and then testing them to find out which are in reality the most effective ones, I think that is certainly the way to go forwards with it.

Fran O’Leary: From the data we have found we have certainly seen that digital communications feed younger people who say they don’t vote. That is important including Facebook as well as YouTube. Secondly for them the family is a core role and interpersonal interactions play a big role. They are slightly less interested in newspapers than young people who do vote. So looking at those two areas, I know you guys have taken evidence from the ballot and doing more of the interpersonal registration issues, and there are key areas to focus on, but I absolutely agree with Damian on the testing front. Every idea should be tested rigorously before—

Damian Lyons Lowe: I think it is very interesting—sorry, if I may—Facebook and Twitter are a personally customised data source. I think that is a bit of a clue to how people want things to be. They want things to be personalised and customised to them personally. So if you are looking to connect with somebody the way that social media has exploded as a concept is that you choose who you want to follow, the things that you care about and the things that you want to see, and I think that would be a good directional force about connection.

Chair: And has to be of sufficient quality and length that you can put over what could be a quite complicated argument. It doesn't quite fit in the 117 characters.

Tracey Crouch: One hundred and forty.

Chair: I will need to get upgraded, obviously. But anyway we look forward to the remake of the Danish film, possibly starring Mr Flynn and Mr Russell Brand. I had better stop there. Fran, Patrick, Damian, thank you so much for your time.

Damian Lyons Lowe: It has been a pleasure. Thank you.

Chair: It has been quite instructive. If you have further thoughts please do not hesitate to drop them to us in writing and we will take it into account as we move towards, hopefully, creating an interesting report for all parties to act upon about improving voter engagement, whoever wins the next general election. Thank you so much.

Fran O'Leary: Thank you.

Patrick Brione: Thank you.

Chair: Thank you, colleagues, for your attendance this morning.