

Make the politicians listen to you

Traditional Tory supporters could be forgiven for raising a slightly sceptical eyebrow at David Cameron's recent promise to open his policy-making process to public debate. The Stand Up, Speak Up initiative calls on Conservative associations across the country to organise meetings for members of the public to have their say on party policy.

In a letter to party activists, Cameron calls this an unprecedented policy debate, but many Labour supporters may have felt a queasy sense of *déjà vu*.

The Big Conversation, launched by Tony Blair in late 2003, promised to give the public an opportunity to influence Labour policy. Blair toured the country holding consultations and thousands logged on to the campaign website to post their suggestions. However, when the 2005 election arrived, not a single policy could be traced back to the Big Conversation. In reality, many felt, it had been a Big Con.

The eagerness of both Labour and Tory leaderships to reach over the heads of their own members in order to formulate new policies indicates a serious breakdown in the democratic process.

People join parties to effect change and expect their input in terms of activism to be rewarded with a say in the direction the party takes. Yet internal democracy has been largely sidelined in favour of a reliance on focus groups, policy

forums and non-binding votes at party conference.

Becoming an MP does not guarantee that you will have significant input into policy. Many hard-working members end up frustrated by the lack of consultation that has become the norm on both sides of the House. If even MPs find themselves sidelined in the policy-making process, what hope do members of the public have of influencing the debate?

The temptation to throw up our hands and say a plague on all your houses may be great – and from the tone of the comments on the *Telegraph* website, some readers may have already succumbed – but this is not the time for cynicism. The urge for parties to control the debate has been accompanied by a significant fall in voter turnout. Participation at the last two general elections has been the lowest since the war. Party leaders recognise that something needs to be done to reconnect the electorate with the political process.

Gordon Brown has already shown that he is aware of the scale of the challenge, promising to take action to build trust in our democracy, using his first speech as PM-in-waiting to call for a more open form of dialogue between citizens and politicians genuinely to debate problems and solutions. When he committed himself to bringing forward reform proposals to renew our constitution – with



Billy Bragg

the first draft constitutional reform Bill later this year – many sat up and took notice.

Although viewed by many as dry and dusty, constitutional reform has the ability to address the issue at the heart of the malaise in our democracy – the loss of trust in politicians of all parties. The first step would be to construct a new Bill of Rights, rooted in Magna Carta and the settlements of the 17th century, but also reflecting modern notions of universal rights.

Such a document would embody traditional British values of fairness and tolerance while reminding us that we have responsibilities to one another. It would also protect the rights of the individual when they come into conflict with the power of an over-mighty executive. Ultimately, a new Bill of Rights would provide politicians with a set of rules by which we the people

consent to be governed – rules that would be known by all, unlike the present situation, whereby, under our currently invisible constitution, any government with a majority can simply move the goal-posts.

But who should frame this new settlement? Surely politicians have a conflict of interest in formulating the rules that govern their behaviour? While welcoming Brown's initiative on this issue, should we just sit back and wait for him – or David Cameron – to tell us what our rights are?

The fact that Brown already has a draft Bill planned has caused concern that any consultation will be bogus, providing merely a fig-leaf for more top-down decision-making. The time has come for people of all political persuasions and none to become pro-active in this debate. Brown has set the agenda; let us take the initiative.

Last week, the Power inquiry published a call for Brown to undertake a full deliberative process before reforming the constitution. Instead of relying on a Royal Commission, which can often deliver pre-determined solutions, Power wants Brown to convene Citizens' Assemblies, where the true meaning of British values can be openly debated before being enshrined in a Bill of Rights. Power has drawn together a wide spectrum of people and organisations – it is not often that I find myself agreeing with Simon Heffer, for instance – illustrating

that this is not an issue that lends itself to the old structures of Left or Right.

The formulation of a Bill of Rights goes to the heart of who we are, both as individuals and as a nation. It will not solve the problems that we face in the modern globalised economy, but it will provide us with a set of principles around which to build a more cohesive society.

The process by which we agree on those principles will be crucial if the final document is to have any legitimacy in the eyes of the public. A constitution written behind closed doors by politicians will not restore trust. Worse, it would squander a great opportunity to re-engage the public by empowering them to participate in a genuine debate about freedom and responsibility.

Between now and the next general election, both Brown and Cameron will be searching for ways to differentiate themselves not only from each other, but from what has gone before. Already, ideas such as localism and constitutional reform are being aired in the hope of engaging the public interest.

In order for our politicians to replace warm words with action, we have first to demonstrate our willingness to become involved. The Power inquiry petition is the first step in this process. You can sign up at www.makeitanissue.org.uk