

## **Just Listening**

During 2006 I held 'Just Listening' sessions around the Bridgend Constituency. Just Listening is an opportunity for more wide-ranging discussion between members of Parliament and their constituents. It involved a series of 90 minute sessions held in a variety of local venues with a focused discussion around four main themes. The themes this time were: Quality of Life, Fairness, Remaking Politics and National Identity. As the name suggests, the people do the talking and the politicians do the listening. It is as simple as that.

Below is a summary of what was heard in Just Listening Sessions around the whole of the UK.

### **Question 1 - What single thing would most improve your, and your community's, quality of life by 2010 and is this the Government's job?**

For most people what really determines their quality of life is local: clean streets; reliable transport; the quality of personal relationships with doctors, nurses, teachers and the police. People have high expectations of both national and local Government in ensuring that their needs are met, especially on things like housing, pensions and policing, and want to see a high level of investment in these key services sustained. However our constituents also told us that more should be done to emphasise the importance of people taking responsibility for themselves and for things like clearing up after their dogs or knowing what their children are up to.

*'When it comes to litter, that's people not the council' (Dulwich & West Norwood)'*

The idea of shared responsibility came across most clearly during the frequent discussions on respect and anti-social behaviour. People want further investment in policing to ensure that it remains community-based and highly visible. At the same time the view is passionately expressed that we all have a responsibility for ensuring our streets are clean and safe. In particular, there is a strong desire to see parents take greater responsibility for unruly children. As a man at one of my sessions bluntly put it,

*'Good manners and respect are not the Government's job, they should be taught at home'. (Dulwich and West Norwood)*

At the same time lots of people in the sessions recognised that more could be done to give teenagers more to do in their neighbourhood.

*'There's a lack of provision in this area for young people; that really could be improved' (Worsley)*

Improving facilities for young people was one among a number of recurrent themes in these sessions, including better housing and more support for parents. Neighbourhood policing was a feature of them all. People welcomed the introduction of Community Support Officers, but the desire for a more visible police presence was universal.

For many young people, the lack of affordable housing was the greatest single concern. There were calls for higher relief from stamp duty, more shared equity arrangements and improved social housing stock to help address this.

In transport it was often the lack of joined-up thinking locally that frustrated people the most. Along with cleanliness and reliability, making sure people didn't 'waste lots of time because timetables don't work together' was an important priority.

In all these areas, People regard their politicians at Westminster as sometimes too focussed on the bigger picture and overlooking those small alterations to policies and procedures which can markedly enhance quality of life. Too much bureaucracy, for example, was a major complaint. Indeed the demand most frequently articulated by pensioners when this question was discussed is simply for help with filling in forms or, ideally, fewer forms. Sometimes all people want is services that listen and respond more.

## **Question 2 - What does fairness mean to you and how could Britain become a fairer society?**

The second theme of Just Listening II was fairness; or more specifically, how we can make society fairer? People said what they meant by fairness was 'equal opportunities', 'equality of access', 'level playing fields'. People have high expectations that the government will create this.

Many government measures were welcome: the New Deal, Minimum Wage and winter fuel allowance for pensioners. But there was frustration that more couldn't be done faster.

*'Much more needs to be done about poor housing, cultural poverty and low expectations' (Blackpool)*

For many at our meetings fairness also meant recognising that if you want the benefits of living in a modern welfare society you have to do your fair share too. This went for those at the top of the income scale – avoiding paying their fair share of tax – as much as for those lower down – cheating on the benefits system.

*'Some people receiving benefits do not want to work or are better off financially if they don't work'. (Wolverhampton South-East)*

Younger people in the sessions particularly said they wanted to go to university or to undertake further study but they also wanted their hard work to be rewarded with degrees or qualifications that are valued by employers and society.

Pensioners said they wanted their lifetime contributions to be better recognised. The level of the state pension remained too low and women and carers feel bitterly that they are 'penalised for their sacrifices'.

Labour's achievements in tackling pensioner poverty – through uprating the pension credit in line with earnings and providing help for the elderly with their winter fuel bills were widely welcomed - but these achievements increased the frustration of some of those who feel left behind.

And there is genuine concern for young people, for whom there was as least as much sympathy as blame combined with a widespread belief that an entire generation is being unfairly demonised by the media.

When Sadiq Khan asked a group of constituents from a variety of ethnic backgrounds whether they thought British society was becoming fairer, there was widespread doubt. They thought the Government had a lot more to do in this area, particularly in investing more in their own local schools and hospitals. They defined fairness as having access to the same quality services and exercising the same rights of everyone else, whatever your background.

*'Fairness begins with education' (Swindon South)*

A key theme which emerged from many of the sessions was the importance of widening participation. Getting more children into good education and keeping them there – whether on academic or vocational training – was the best chance to give them a good start in life and a *'fair crack of the whip'*.

Some groups felt particularly targeted, like motorists and fathers, where it was felt they were losing out as society and public priorities changed.

*'The Government has done a lot for parents, but I think carers have been a bit forgotten about' (Stevenage)*

Carers were another group where the government should be doing more, especially as the vast majority of them are women.

### **Question 3 - What can we all do to make politics more honest, more relevant and more effective?**

Discussion on this question revealed a big gap between local issues and national politics – and a feeling of 'us and them' for many people. There was widespread trust and admiration for public servants – particularly doctors and teachers - but when the discussion focussed on the national level there was widespread *distrust* of Westminster and Whitehall.

Our constituents said that MPs had been stripped of too much of their influence and that Parliament no longer holds Government enough to account. People weren't sure whether Government or Parliament (or *'the Whips'*) were more to blame for this.

*'Get the Prime Minister to listen more to his MPs' (Rhondda)*

People accounted for the decline in political participation and voter turnout in Britain by reference to a lack of relevance in our political institutions. People needed to feel more connected and involved in decision making. Young people especially found single issue politics more engaging and worthwhile. The government should find more ways to include young people in decision making.

*'Young people don't always realise their issues are political and that they can make a difference' (Falkirk)*

People responded particularly strongly to instances where the Government was seen to be working single-mindedly on particular issues, with tangible results.

*'Gordon Brown's work on child poverty is one of the best things this Government has done.'* (Dulwich and West Norwood)

Our constituents said they wanted to see more powers devolved to local government to make it 'more relevant' as well as reform of our current institutions and procedures to make them more transparent. 'Genuine' consultation – as opposed to what's just done for 'form's sake' – was vital on contentious policy areas.

Our constituents weren't very happy either about Punch and Judy style of some debate in the House of Commons.

*'Parliamentary behaviour is like a bunch of school kids; no business could ever survive if it was run like that.'*(Stevenage)

There is also a perception that too many initiatives fail to materialise or are simply not sustained and this makes people sceptical about the Government's commitment to delivery. We were encouraged to 'promise less, and deliver more'. Equally 'too much spin' was damaging; this is an era of 'show me rather than tell me Government'. More direct channels of communication between the public and Government were considered critical to helping to achieve this.

People generally regarded their MPs as approachable and hard working. They said they would much prefer them to be 'human': to admit if they made mistakes, accept limitations, apologise and move on.

Many also regarded the media as overly aggressive, intrusive and untrustworthy.

*'There's only ever two things in a newspaper that's correct, that's the price and the date.'* (Stevenage)

**Question 4 - What does Britishness mean to you and what can we do to make it more of a reality to unify society?**

*'Brits have a tradition of being quietly confident ...we can be proud of ourselves without having to shout about it'* (Hove)

Labour supporters were less concerned about defining what it means to be British than were the non-members who took part in the sessions.

Labour members generally wanted to see a more positive story told about immigration into the UK, particularly on the importance of bringing in new skills and industry. Other non-Labour participants were concerned that we shouldn't be so self-critical as a nation and needed to be more assertive in celebrating our identity. There was general support for the idea of a 'British Day'.

For some, Britishness could be defined by virtue of its values, particularly tolerance, self-respect and diversity (*'our mongrel blood'*).

*“Freedom of speech is part of Britishness’ (Gateshead East and Washington West)*

But becoming a British Citizen should be a rigorous process that requires applicants to demonstrate that they understand the country and are ready to make a positive contribution in joining it.

*The vast majority think a Great Britain test for all immigrants would be a good thing’ (Battersea)*

Citizenship ceremonies are popular and there is a great emphasis on the importance of immigrants learning English. Linking back to questions of fairness, people want those who come to the UK to ‘live by our rules’.

In some places there was genuine concern expressed that a large influx of people might be detrimental to local people seeking jobs or social housing, although people are at pains to say their worries are not about new immigrants per se but simply about the ability of the housing and labour markets to cope – they see it as a straightforward matter of fairness.

Coupled with these concerns was a real frustration that this debate needs to be had without people being accused of pandering to the political Right. Stifling genuine anxieties and debate was the worst thing you could do.

*‘We should reclaim the Union Jack from the right wing groups’  
(Gateshead East and Washington West)*

*Better to have an open debate than impinge on freedom of speech – a British liberty.*

Politicians should be doing more to help bring the country together. It was sad but true that tragic events, like the Country’s response to the 7/7 bombings did more to show the spirit of Britain than more celebratory events.

Participants wanted the Government to use national events like the 2012 Olympics or the celebrations for the Queen’s Golden Jubilee to help bring the Country together. People would feel themselves more part of one Country at these moments, wherever they or their families came from the past. For younger people especially, where you were now was much more important than where you family had come from in defining you as British.

*You welcome people when you feel safe; you’re tolerant of others when you feel strong in yourself.’ (Stevenage)*