

Participation, charities and the media

Transcript of remarks by Ed Miliband MP to a Charity Commission / BBC conference on participation

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It's a great pleasure to be here and I want to thank the Charity Commission and the BBC for coming together for this incredibly important event.

Let me just try in my remarks to say a couple of things. First of all, I want to say why I think this agenda of participation, in its broadest sense, is incredibly important. Then I want to say what I think some of the implications are for government, charities and the media. And I do so, particularly in relation to the latter, hesitantly, because there are so many people with such expertise gathered here in this room.

Equality

In terms of why I think the agenda matters, I just want to say four very quick things.

The first is about why this matters for equality. If you think about the way in which progressive politics has thought about the concept of equality, it has tended to be in the context of what we deliver to people, and much less about *how* it is delivered. But actually, as a constituency MP in Doncaster, I see this very much up close.

So just to give you an example of this, one of the issues I've been wrestling with as a constituency MP is the knocking down of an existing council estate. And the process by which this has happened has been pretty slow. And talking to residents who remain on that estate while parts of it are being knocked down:

yes, they are very unhappy about the speed at which it's happening, but the thing they're most unhappy about is the failure to keep them informed about what is going on, and the failure to communicate with them.

That brings home to me, in a very extreme way, the sense that, I would say, we have thought often about equality as a concept, and how we deliver it; but much less about the relationship between public institutions and people, and whether there is equality in that of any kind, and respect in that relationship. So, that's the first reason why I think it's important.

Deference

I think the second reason is that the reality is that people are much less deferential – and I think that's an extremely good thing. I see this as a constituency MP. 30 or 40 years ago, as a constituency MP, if I'd gone to my constituency once a month, people would have said, “oh that's great! The MP's come and had a visit, and isn't it nice of him”. And I know that from reading the history books, but also talking to colleagues who've been in parliament a long time.

Expectations have been massively raised, and it's not just through Members of Parliament, it's through the police, it's in relation to the health service, in relation to education – and I think that's an unalloyed good thing, actually. And, in thinking about this speech I suppose what occurred to me was, I'd like expectations to be raised further. So, in relation to education for example, in my constituency, I actually wish parents had greater levels of expectations than they do often, and greater ability to participate and talk to a professional.

But, I think the reality is that overall the trend is more demanding and less deferential.

Engagement

Thirdly, I think the reason this agenda is important is that we won't tackle the problems that we face in our society without the engagement and participation of people. I'm someone who believes in the role of an empowering state, but I suppose what I've learned over 10 years in government is that you absolutely also need the engagement of people. If you think about the problems in relation to the health service, where 80 per cent of visits to GPs are for chronic conditions, people's self-management of the problem is as important as getting in to see their general practitioner.

If you think about education and some of the issues we face there, the engagement and participation of parents is absolutely fundamental to their kids' learning.

If you think about policing, one of the issues I think is a big area of concern is the extent to which there are mechanisms of accountability for people, at a local level, to engage with what's happening in their area. Again, people have a feeling of a lack of voice.

So thirdly I think it's necessary to tackle the problems that we face. And that's true of climate change obviously as well.

New possibilities

And then, fourthly, there is a sense of possibility, in which the barriers to participation have been lowered by the internet and the impact of the internet. If you think about 'Net Mums', which some people will know about: 250,000 mothers are registered on Net Mums. Local groups provide information about childcare services, advice, a whole range of things. It is a pretty organic movement which would never have been possible in this form and with such low barriers to participation before the advent of the internet.

So that's why I think this agenda is both important and in a way, its time has come. The question is, then, what are the implications for government, charities and the media? And, again, I emphasise this point that the expertise in this room will have a much better sense of this than me, but let me just offer some reflections, which hopefully we can discuss.

Accountability and respect

I think first – and this will have been implicit in what I said – for government the lesson is that we've got to have much more respect for public institutions. The housing example I cited is an obvious one.

We've got to have much greater mechanisms of accountability at local level, because people want the option to participate and shape services. And, in a sense, this is an argument about representative democracy and participation. The balance between the extent to which people are willing to accept representative democracy, voting once every four years, as the be all and end all, has changed. People are much less willing to accept that; people want to engage and for services to be accountability. So that is a lesson to government.

I think the other thing for government is – again, I referred to this – is to understand the way in which peer-to-peer networks can help solve problems. So something has been set up called the Expert Patient Panel, which some people will know about. That is about people with chronic conditions helping other people with chronic conditions to help cope with them, and to help them to interact with their general practitioners. That is, in a way, a sign of the way in which peer-to-peer relationships, made quite separate from government, can aid the process of public services.

Charities and campaigning

What about the implications for charities? I think there are three implications that I want to mention.

The first is that campaigning by charities is going to become more, not less, important, as a result of this agenda, because people have the desire and the means to establish campaigns. If you take Pro-Test, that is an organisation which advocates responsible animal testing, set up by a young kid called Laurie Pycroft. That is an expression, in my view, of the way in which people have both the desire but also the means - and this organisation's grown pretty quickly - to campaign and set up organisations. Campaigning by charities has sometimes been controversial over the last 20 or 30 years, but I think campaigning is going to become more, not less, important.

I think, also, there is going to be a challenge, through this process, to established charities. Established charities will have to catch up and in a way lead and respond to this desire that there is. If you think about the NSPCC and their Full Stop campaign, they now have a way in which you can not only sign up to the Full Stop campaign, you can, through the wonders of the internet, put in your postcode, find out who in your street supports this campaign, get involved with them, communicate with them. That to me is a great example of a national mission, a national campaign, which is shaped locally. And I suspect that will become the wave of the future in campaigning.

In a way, the first person to do this – or the first person to my knowledge – was Howard Dean in his presidential campaign. He used a website called meetup.com, and his concept was that we have to have the national campaign, but we let people determine this locally, we enable them to come in to contact with each other through the 'meet-up' process. And I suspect that this will increasingly become the way in which charities and others campaign and mobilise people's participation.

I think there is a question here though, about the extent to which traditional charities may find themselves bypassed. I was talking to a young chief executive recently and she said to me, 'well, actually, there was a petition on the Downing Street website signed by 5,000 people in the area that I'm concerned with, and I didn't know about it. I certainly didn't set it up, and I didn't know about it until someone emailed me and told me about it'. So, again, I suspect that shows the way in which there will be a challenge to established charities to put themselves at the forefront of campaigning. Otherwise they may find that it takes place around them.

I think the other question in this, and again, this strikes me as a politician and a member of the Labour party, is the extent to which there will be issues and

greater demand for accountability in relation to the charitable sector from membership.

I'm very struck, when I think about the debates in the Labour party, about the need to hold the leadership to account, the need to shape and determine policy, not just through the annual conference but through processes during the year. I'd very much contrast that with my sense of the accountability demanded from the membership of large single-issue campaigns like Make Poverty History, where actually you can argue that there is a greater sense of - maybe, deference is the wrong word – but a greater sense of trust, that we will let the leaders of this organisation set the policy.

A question, and genuinely a question, is, will we find as this process of demand for accountability increases, and in a way people are less willing to trust, will we find a sense of greater demand for say over the policies of charities of which people are members. I genuinely don't know the answer to that but it is interesting to discuss.

Media

Let me then, also hesitantly in a way, as I say, because of the audience expertise, say something about media, and the implications of all this for the media.

I think one thing to say is that there is a sort of, a slight danger of naivety in this process that one almost thinks that established institutions will somehow disappear; that it won't be the BBC, it will become OhMyNews.com, the Korean website where it's citizen journalism. I don't think that's the case. I think people will continue to want authoritative sources – whether it's the BBC, whether it's NHS Direct. You may want advice from your peers etc., but you also want to be able to rely on NHS Direct when your kid has a problem. And similarly in relation to Wikipedia.

So I think one piece of good news, I suppose, for established media institutions like the BBC, is that I think that actually it may end up making the case for institutions like the BBC stronger, not weaker.

The public sphere

I think there is also a second question in my mind. I was reading a transcript that Polly did of a citizens' jury process, over four weeks or so – people may know citizens' juries, they are a sort of deliberative processes involving members of the public. I suppose one thing that strikes me is that this is very much an enhanced form of participation. If you take the Downing Street website at one end, where people click a button and say, I don't want road charging or whatever it is. That is

one end of the process. Citizens' juries are a much more demanding form of participation. People go away for weekends and deliberate over policies.

And I think one thing that is interesting reading about some of those processes is people's conclusions feel to me like much better informed, much more reasoned conclusions. Perhaps not surprisingly, because they've spent a few weekends discussing policy, but I guess the challenge back to the media is, what does that tell us about the process of public debate and deliberation?

One of my biggest frustrations as a politician is not when people disagree with me – that's fine. It's when people disagree with me on the basis of wildly inaccurate facts and judgements. I particularly think that in relation to immigration where people often have, and I speak as a local MP, an exaggerated sense of the scale of immigration. Now, the informed and enlightened public sphere is a responsibility on all of us, and I'm in no sense saying it's not a responsibility on politicians as well, but is there a challenge here? If one of the points of citizens' juries is, in a way, get a well-informed, deliberative, sensible debate, what does that tell us about what takes place outside citizens' juries, and what are the ways in which we can have a better informed process as part of that?

Conclusion

They are just some thoughts, really, and questions to raise.

I think the final thing I would say is, if we think about the next 10 years, we've got this review going on of the third sector and its relationship with government over the next 10 years. I think that we are really in the foothills of this agenda. I think people will become much, much more demanding; much, much less deferential and I think it will have implications, that I'm sure we can't necessarily even anticipate now, for all of us: government, media and charities. So I'm really pleased to be here and have the chance to discuss it and also to hear about the conclusions from the conference.

Thank you very much.