

# THE LIBERAL INSTITUTE

## POLITICAL ACCESS BROADCASTING

*"engaging the electorate"*

**Rob Wheway**

### **Introduction**

This paper recognises the shortcomings of the present system of Party Political Broadcasts (PPBs) and recommends that it be replaced by a system of Political Access Broadcasting (PABs).

It makes recommendations that would increase the engagement of the public in the political processes and strengthen democracy, particularly at local level.

Its recommendations would give opportunities for political debate in the media worth millions of pounds, yet would be at virtually nil cost. The State would enable, rather than give aid.

### **Context**

Our democracy, though not yet in crisis, is showing signs of some significant weaknesses. This is evident in the decreasing numbers of people voting in National Elections; which appears to be a continuing trend.

Significantly the lack of engagement, both in voting and in membership of political parties amongst the younger generations, would appear to indicate that this trend is likely to continue and get worse.

A similar decline is happening in the USA and Robert D Putnam, in his book "Bowling Alone", has very clearly demonstrated that this decline is also associated with a similar decline in participation in political parties, and also in other voluntary and community organisations that make a significant contribution to civic life.

Robert Putnam has made compelling arguments for television watching being associated with a lack of involvement, both in political processes and in other local organisations "Dependence on television for entertainment is not merely a significant predictor of civic disengagement. It is the single most consistent predictor that I have discovered."

I do not take quite the same view as Robert Putnam, as my own research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation ("Facilitating Play in Housing Estates") and a number of Local Authorities tends to indicate that children learn the habit of staying in and watching television because of parental restrictions caused by increased motor traffic.

At the very best however, I believe that it is clear that the broadcast media does not encourage local civic engagement and it is quite likely that there is a causal correlation between watching television and lack of civic participation.

Politicians of all political parties have expressed concern at the declining numbers of people voting and the lack of public engagement, particularly amongst young people, yet very few strategies have been proposed to rectify this. Such suggestions as there have been have tended to concentrate on making it easier to vote (at shopping centres by e-mail etc.), rather than encouraging more engagement.

Whilst it is almost certainly true that a decline in the numbers voting does indicate a lack of engagement, it does not follow that making it easier to vote will significantly increase engagement. Even if it does for a time increase the number of voters, I would argue strongly that, if there is no increasing engagement, the downward trend will continue. There is a danger that it will disguise an underlying trend and put back any attempts to encourage participation in the political processes.

It should also be stated that the fears expressed by politicians are genuine concerns for our democratic processes and our freedoms, rather than merely a wish for their elections to be justified. Politicians realise only too well that democracies can be, and are, overthrown and that the public's freedoms and rights are then taken away. The best defence is an overwhelming public commitment to, and participation in, the democratic processes.

### **The Broadcast Media**

To state that the media are "Machiavellian" is not to be pejorative, but accurately to describe their current role. That is, as with Machiavelli, the instincts are basically democratic, but they have pragmatically moved to a position of involving "Princes", rather than the electorate as a whole.

This has tended to arise both through a simplistic left/right analysis of politics and because speed in response to events has become a crucial element in maintaining credibility, or competitive positions by the media.

Simplistic left/right analysis has not arisen from the media, but has been widely held by political analysts and academics. It suited both Cold War international politics and domestic two party politics. It also made reporting simple, as "Balance" could be achieved by having one person from the left and one from the right.

The result of these forces is that the conventional method of reporting, or discussing an issue, was to obtain a leading figure from the Conservative Party and a leading person from the Labour Party, give them an equal and fair chance to have their say, and the broadcasters could then feel that they were beyond reproach.

The unintentional result of this is that minority, or opposition, views within a

Party are not heard and tremendous power is handed on a plate to the "Princes". Once the leadership "line" had been made on an issue then any different opinions from within a Party are regarded as from "troublemakers", "the usual suspects" (or similar rude phrase). Any such views are then be heralded as "splits" within a Party and could lead to a Party falling significantly in the Opinion Polls; therefore losing seats at the General or Local Government Elections.

This has put incredible power in the hands of the leaders. For, once a policy line has been declared, any dissenters from within the Party know that any criticism, however justified or reasonable, could lead to the dissenter, or their friends, losing seats.

The evidence for this change can be seen in the crocodile tears shed by respected political journalists who decried the fact that politics is becoming "more presidential", without admitting the significant role they have played in making it thus.

The increasing use of spin doctoring has arisen precisely because the crucial political view on any subject emanates from the leadership. The perception of what the leadership has said has become more important than the view of Parliament, individual MP's, political parties or what the facts indicate to be true.

A further influence of the media has been to rob the public and politicians of debates at factory gates, in shopping areas and in church halls. Again this has not been through any deliberate policy but because of the quality of what is broadcast on the radio or television.

In the past political discussions happened amongst people in places where they gathered. This was not because people were inherently better or more concerned in those days; it was that these places had entertainment, recreational and educational benefits.

With the arrival of radio and television people could hear what were apparently the same debates, but at a significantly technically superior level (all the words could be heard) and in superior comfort and with the convenience of being in their own homes.

The shortcoming of the situation is that, together with the almost continual recourse to "the Princes", the local politician's voice is not heard and so increasingly the public vote not on what their local person believes, but on what the national leadership states.

This again strengthens the hand of the leaders, for the local politician no longer relies on the support of their local voters, but is instead beholden to the

"line" or spin doctor message from the central party. Again this is well recognised in what is seen as the increasing power of the Whips.

What is particularly ridiculous is that a large proportion of the population vote for their local politicians on the basis of the appeal of the national leaders; even though those leaders have no say in, and almost certainly no knowledge of, the local issues. They also largely vote regardless of the ability of those local candidates.

Local activism has become less and less important as what matters is not the reality of local politics but the perception of the national leaders. Why become involved if it will not make any difference? This approach means that the local activists, and their knowledge and contacts are increasingly ignored, and therefore discouraged, by national leaders who put their trust in opinion doctors, special advisers and corporate donations.

### **Media The Strengths**

My criticisms of the media are not because of actions that have been deliberately taken, but of the detrimental effects they have had on the democratic process.

In fact I would argue that in many ways it is their professionalism and high quality output that has led to complacency with the organised processes of democracy.

Even though programming has extended to twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty five days per year, on hundreds of television and radio channels, the vast majority still appear to be of good quality. What in the studio can appear hurried and disorganised, and last minute, nevertheless appears on the screen, or over the airwaves as well presented. These presentational skills mean that a talk at a factory gate, or in a church hall, may always struggle to look as good.

There is also a strong commitment to "fairness". The broadcast media are generally trusted to be unbiased and when there are discussion programmes to give each person a fair turn. Again another strength has meant that people feel that they are listening to a debate that is appropriately dealing with the issues.

Whilst many criticisms can be made about their choice, and manner, of subjects covered, nevertheless the coverage of current affairs and programmes such as Question Time mean that on a number of issues the public is well informed and understands that there are legitimate, but different points of view.

One of the encouraging aspects of our democratic debate came in the many informal conversations that people had in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks. People did understand that the terrorism was rooted in more complex issues than just an isolated group of fundamentalists. They realised that going to war on that particular group would not end terrorism and that starting to right the wrongs which have been committed against parts of the Islamic world would be an important step in avoiding repeated and escalating terrorism. They also understood that the USA's own commitment to terrorism, dictators, and indiscriminate weapons of war napalm, landmines etc. had made such attacks almost inevitable but not justified.

Instead of an immediate knee-jerk reaction of retaliation there was sophisticated debate. It is right to suggest that one of the contributory causes of this was the balanced and informed manner in which issues have been dealt with by the media over many years.

In addition to what might be called "hard news" many other programmes such as documentaries, consumer programmes, daytime chat shows and phone-ins, will often contribute to the debate on an issue. These demonstrate that people are still interested in discussion about the issues that affect their lives and, no doubt, the programmes do have an effect on the political process as a whole. The problem is that the linkage into the organised democratic process is missing.

That is not to say that these things should not happen. It is part of a healthy democracy and free society that these matters are discussed freely as a general part of life. However, because of the lack of linkage, the public does not see that it can make the changes it desires through the democratic processes.

Another way in which the media has assisted the democratic processes is that by bringing its subjects into peoples homes its almost certainly helps to build a more tolerant, inclusive society. Celebrities report that people talk to them, on first name terms, as if they were old friends. Television has the effect of making you feel that you've sat down in the same room and chatted with that person.

It is slightly harder to maintain the notion that white people are superior to black people, when you've sat down for a chat in your own house with Nelson Mandela, Denise Lewis and Lenny Henry.

Also TV and radio chat and debate shows enable politicians, who have been portrayed as bogey men or women in newspapers or on the news, to say what they mean rather than constantly being reported as what others would like to think they mean. In fact the bogey status can become unsustainable if they come across as reasonable people on such shows.

### Media Corrupting Democracy

Whilst our media is highly professional and does try to be fair, there is an inherent potential for quite significant corruption to occur.

The media has significant power in deciding what issues constitute "the news". They filter out many issues that they do not believe to be newsworthy or interesting. This is a powerful position, for if an issue does not hit the news it usually disappears. Equally a non-issue can become highly controversial and change the opinion polls merely because the media have latched on to it.

It is ridiculous that Fred's unions or Freda's corns in Devon may affect the chance of someone getting elected in Cumbria or Scotland, yet such is the power of the media that this is precisely what can happen.

This power means that it becomes much more sensible for highly sophisticated lobbyists to operate, rather than for organisations to encourage debate amongst the grass roots. A lobbyist can achieve in a short time major national coverage of an issue, whereas petitions, local meetings, letters and so on from local people in their own area are likely to have no effect whatsoever. The effect of the media therefore is to discourage local engagement in politics. They increasingly become dependant on those lobbyists who will inevitably tend to reflect the views of those with the power and privilege to pay them.

It also follows that, if less and less people become involved in politics, and more and more elections depend upon the issues that have been selected for the news, the potential for bribing those who select those issues will be come huge.

It is also an inevitable consequence that the poor and the powerless will become increasingly marginalized by the process and ignored by the parties (as has been the deliberate strategy in the USA). A great safeguard of democracy is that the poor person's vote is worth exactly the same as the rich persons. If however the processes ignore people power (which costs the individual little) and concentrates on professional lobbyists (which is expensive) then people will feel excluded and become less likely to vote.

### Principles

Liberals would argue strongly that democracy is a process by which the people reach agreements on laws, regulations and structures that govern their lives, and how communal monies are obtained and disbursed. This process is facilitated by the election of Representatives who carry out the details on behalf of the people, whilst still being in contact with, and answerable to, the people.

It is NOT a system by which "Princes" are elected, who then rule for a period. Power should remain in the hands of the electorate not be given away every 4 or 5 years with a simple mark on a paper.

Political Broadcasting should be based on the following principles:

1. It should enhance the democratic process.
2. It should engage the electorate.
3. It should help them to decide for whom they should vote.
4. It should not be dependent upon the amount of money being spent.

### PPBs and Election Debates

The present system of PPBs and associated publicity fails on all the above criteria.

Firstly they are principally adverts and therefore increasingly have emphasised selling points rather than issues.

Secondly it does not engage the public in the debate about the issues.

Thirdly it positively persuades the electorate to vote on the basis of the National Leader, rather than their local candidates and relevant issues.

Fourthly it, together with other campaigning such as national poster campaigns, is crucially dependent upon the amount of money being spent, rather than on the force of the argument.

The PPBs are also viewed negatively and with distaste by the media professionals who view them as amateurish and a nuisance.

Restrictions imposed around election times also mean that many local radio and television stations view political debate around that time with fear, rather than as an opportunity for them to engage with, and give access to, their local audience.

Should there be a contentious candidate, or a contentious issue, then the local media may find it easier to duck rather than have a positive reaction and wish to bring the issues out into the public debate.

### Political Access Broadcasting

I would recommend a new principle be adopted and that is, if two or more candidates in an election request it, then their local broadcasting media be obliged to facilitate a programme, or series of programmes.

The purpose of which is to enable the various issues to be raised and to enable the viewers/listeners to make an informed choice between the different candidates.

There would be a presumption that the broadcast would happen so long as all candidates had the opportunity to agree the process and to take part. The broadcast would not be stopped by someone refusing to take part.

There would of course need to be certain safeguards for candidates who suddenly became ill (at public meetings when this happened the Agent would sometimes make a statement) and there would need to be arrangements for a candidate with special needs, for example a deaf candidate may need someone who could sign.

At present local television and radio are fearful of falling foul of the law and so there is a tendency to avoid political debates at election time. So at precisely the time when such debate is most desirable, there is pressure to avoid it.

With Political Access Broadcasting the role of the media would be changed to a positive one, with the journalist encouraged to use their professionalism rather than being sidelined and restricted.

Clearly there will need to be safeguards and limitations, which are discussed later.

The basic format of the programme would be subject to discussion between the candidates and the radio or television station, but could be from a wide variety of options such as a studio debate, a public "Question Time", individual "Jimmy Young" type interviews or mini documentaries, where each candidate is interviewed at different places in the constituency/ward etc. (see Appendix A)

The duty on the programme makers would be to assist the candidates to get their message across in a positive way; such assistance to be fair and equitable. In this way the media professionals would be using their skills and expertise to do what they can do best, whereas the candidates, as the most knowledgeable in what they are standing for, would be doing what they can do best.

There should be no charge as the programme costs would not be significantly different from the programme it would replace, but neither should there be a charge to the station for any school, community hall used. Candidates should not be able to spend anything to gain an advantage in presentation eg a special display which would appear on camera (personal care excluded from this restriction). On commercial stations advertisements could continue in their normal slots, safeguards might be needed but the common-sense of

the broadcasters would probably be sufficient.

### Pressure Groups

The current system of access to the media tends to enhance professional lobbyists at the expense of grass roots organisations. This is evidenced by the growth of lobbying organisations, which have realised that the right word in the right ear, at the correct time, is now far more effective than mass movements that may influence their local politicians.

This in turn is an inducement to financial sleaze and cronyism. As politics becomes more and more about the relationships between fewer and fewer people it follows that the public has less and less influence.

The lack of opportunity for protest groups to be involved in the process has meant that some resort to ineffective and democratically prejudicial practices at the time of elections.

One of the common approaches is for a letter to be sent to all candidates a few days before the election. This may be couched in simplistic terms (not quite "Have you stopped beating your wife?" but not far off). When these letters are returned the groups then alert their members to vote for this or that candidate on the basis of their replies.

Because the questions are so simplistic, and not in the open public debate, you could have the ridiculous outcome that a candidate who would happily drop a nuclear bomb, or napalm on innocent villages, killing all men, women, children and animals, would be endorsed by an organisation because the candidate happened to be against fox-hunting or abortion (I use these as examples rather than being specific references to particular anti fox-hunting or anti-abortion organisations).

If on the other hand these organisations knew that there would be a strong possibility of broadcast public meetings during the election campaign, it is likely they would be keen to organise one. This would have a number of benefits.

Firstly the issues would be debated and so the overall opinions of the candidates would be seen, rather than a yes/no to one particular question.

Secondly these organisations would soon realise that a poorly attended meeting would reflect badly on them and so it would be in their interest to encourage the public to attend.

Thirdly it would become apparent that if their audience consisted only of white middle-class, or middle-aged women or men, this would reflect badly on them; so again there would be pressure on them to engage people in the

democratic process from as broad a background as possible.

Fourthly experience would quickly show campaign groups that the issue they are promoting, and they as organisations, would come across much better in the media if their approach is one of calm reason and a preparedness to listen to a contrary argument, rather than raucous, simplistic sloganising. I know that the vast majority of campaign groups would wish to take the thoughtful approach.

As with gardening clubs who queue up to be on Gardeners Question Time and Churches who do the same for Songs of Praises it is likely that the media's involvement would be likely to encourage attendance.

A further benefit of public participation in meetings is that they see the candidates face to face and can speak to them afterwards. Not only does this demystify politics but also encourages involvement. If people are inspired or encouraged by a speaker they may well think of joining that party. If, on the other hand, they think that they could do better, well then they may be encouraged to stand for office next time.

Local public debate enhances status (and media coverage enhances further) but enables people to see that politicians "are ordinary people just like you or me and I could be one too".

#### **Political Advertising, Channels and/or State Funding**

In a free society it could be argued that political parties should be able to place advertisements as any commercial organisation can do, or that a political party should be able to run its own television or radio station.

Whilst superficially attractive, I believe them to be flawed for two main reasons. Firstly they avoid debate and secondly they increase costs, which inevitably leads to corruption.

Democracy is a process through which competing ideas, views and needs are decided through a process of debate and discussion, until agreements are reached on the appropriate way forward. Dedicated advertisements or channels deliberately aim to avoid the debate by presenting a political party as a product, which is sufficient of itself to solve all life's problems (if the Coke advertisement can suggest that the world will live in harmony just by drinking Coke, then how much more will a political party wish to suggest).

Our experience of poster campaigns is that the parties spend vast amounts of money promoting slogans that do not enhance the debate. They probably have little effect on the electorate, but the parties are so afraid of losing a small fraction of a percentage point in the Opinion Polls that they are

prepared to spend the money anyway.

The experience from America is that television advertisements tend to be very simplistic, and a high proportion of them are merely negative. The public may enjoy some of the revelations, but they do not trust them, yet millions of dollars are spent on them.

Where there are separate channels dedicated to a religious organisation the experience is that they tend to speak either to the converted, or to the vulnerable and that a balanced debate can only be found by switching to different channels; an arduous and time-consuming process.

Not only therefore do these approaches not engage people in the political debate, but the scale of the costs means that the political parties are forced to raise increasingly vast amounts of money. This is only achieved by approaching rich commercial organisations, or rich lobby groups. However much the parties may deny it, this cannot do anything but have a corrupting influence on their policies and programmes. As can be seen from the U.S.A and the U.K., it does inevitably lead to actual personal corruption.

Some people have argued for State Funding for political parties. The danger with that is that the money would be used in the ways described above. State money put into advertising, even if at the lowest level, would increase the amount of advertising and therefore increase the prices. The political parties have not demonstrated so far how such funding might be used to improve the democratic processes.

The benefits of the system outlined in this Paper are that the costs to the State are negligible, though the benefits are of a very high monetary value indeed.

Given that these benefits are vast it would seem reasonable to significantly lower the cap on national spending by political parties, thereby reducing the potential for sleaze.

Other benefits of public meetings are that it encourages face-to-face engagement. If someone is speaking to an audience, small gestures, body language, eye contact and tone of voice, contribute to the dialogue as much as the actual words that are spoken. Both the public and politicians are significantly more "in touch" with each other's feelings when they are in the same room than they ever will be via a television screen.

#### **Safeguards**

As the value to anyone standing for Office would be high, it might be reasonable to make some additional safeguards.

The public would be offended if Sexy Susie or Randy Roger used the broadcast to advertise salacious wares, or if a commercial organisation merely used it as an advertisement.

On the basis that what we should be doing is to encourage engagement by the electorate, the most simple and cost-effective way of doing this would be to increase the number of electors signing the nomination forms.

If it was increased to, say, three hundred (300) for Parliamentary elections and fifty (50) for local elections this would mean that candidates, or people from their parties, would need to meet a significant number of electors and engage them in the process. It would be a small but routine additional task for the Elections Office of the Local Authority, but the main check would be that the list would need to be printed and made public. As with election expenses, the main checks would therefore be done by the opposing parties.

I would make one small practical suggestion and that is that the candidates be encouraged to supply up to five per cent additional signatures. My feeling is with that large number of signatures it is always possible for the odd error to creep in (I once had the experience of someone signing for her husband before I could stop her, which messed up that nomination form). This would prevent a whole nomination becoming invalid through some innocent mistake, whilst still providing the safeguard.

It is my view that this would be a sufficient safeguard. If however, in the fullness of time, it was found not to be sufficient, then a further safeguard would be for the nominators to have been deemed to have cast their vote.

Having said there needs to be increased safeguards, I believe that it cannot be stated strongly enough that in a free society one cannot prevent some candidates who might be deemed "silly" or "annoying". It demonstrates the maturity and strength of our democracy that someone like a Screaming Lord Sutch can stand in an election, without anyone getting unduly worried about it.

Any safeguards that prevented anyone saying anything silly or annoying would be a gross infringement on freedom of speech. Equally, anything that completely prevented unusual candidates from standing, would be a gross infringement of our democracy.

#### **Parties Advocating Violence**

Whenever access to public political debates is discussed an objection will usually be made to candidates sharing a platform with the National Front, or similar.

This issue is however wider than that. Within our own country representatives of both Unionist and Republican organisations, who have clear links with terrorists, have stood in elections. Animal Rights extremists have been associated with terrorist acts and, certainly in the U.S.A, so have anti-abortion extremists. Within living memory there have been candidates who have been sympathetic to Hitler and Stalin.

Participation by extremists would be significantly safeguarded by the larger number of signatures required. They would also be constrained by laws preventing the incitement to violence.

Because political access broadcasting withdraws the strait-jacket of party political broadcasting, it should be possible on many occasions for the candidates to reach an agreement on a form of broadcast that meant they did not have to share the same platform if that is what they refused to do.

However I believe that we should learn lessons from Northern Ireland, that is, that it is better to have people debating through the political processes, rather than through the bomb and the gun.

Democratic ideas need to be defeated by rational debate and just laws not by exclusion, interment and similar unjust approaches, which only tend to justify and encourage violent responses.

#### **Recognition of Excellence**

Having taken part in numerous political debates, it is my experience that the candidates usually agree on whether the event has been well organised, and whether it has been well chaired. This is usually separate from whether they personally feel they performed well or badly.

This is not unlike in football or cricket where good refereeing or umpiring is recognised by both sides, win or lose.

It would be reasonable to give some awards to particular radio and television stations whose ability to be both fair in the eyes of the candidates, and engaging in the eyes of the audience was recognised by all.

Innovation in reaching electors who do not usually participate could be recognised. For example, encouraging unemployed people to organise a "Question Time" at the Jobcentre. (see Appendix B)

Which school with a sixth form would wish to be known as one that never had a television or radio debate at the time of an election? The whole thrust of political access broadcasting would be to encourage participation and engagement.

There would clearly be educational benefits in citizenship education to schools taking part. At present teachers, fearing accusations of being partisan, sometimes duck the hard issues of politics and only cover citizenship in terms of neighbourliness. Debates between candidates can bring politics into the school without the school appearing partisan. Video recording would allow analysis and reflection and stimulate further debate.

#### **Local Government**

Political access broadcasting would be relatively simple for Parliamentary elections. Either there would be one or two local stations that covered the constituency, or there would be a few constituencies within a station's broadcasting range. Local broadcasters should be able to reach amicable agreement on who covers which constituency and sharing them out between themselves.

When it comes to local government, the sheer number of candidates would mean that some compromises would have to be made.

Where political parties predominate it is likely that they would be able to reach some agreement on a reasonable number of seats to have PAB.

These could be divided between prime time, daytime and nighttime. Modern technology means that ones broadcast at inconvenient times could be recorded by people and then watched at their leisure.

There would need to be some protocols agreed in advance which were both fair to the candidates and to the broadcasters. These could be amended over time in the light of experience.

Where independent candidates are a significant proportion some other protocols would need to be formulated.

#### **Supporting/Policing**

There would almost certainly need to be a body to oversee PAB.

In many cases where agreements could not be reached then an independent person could draw lots to decide on which option to take. This should be the normal procedure for deciding on order of appearance or speaking etc.

In the vast majority of cases the commitment to fair "rules" by the candidates and the professionalism of the media would I believe mean that little, if any, supervision would be necessary. Most candidates feel that discussions in the media and public debates in church halls or similar are generally fair.

The independent body would need to draw up protocols and arbitrate in disputes.

It may be desirable for participants (journalists, candidates, audience) to complete a brief assessment form immediately after the event (as football and cricket teams do about the referee or umpire and as is common practice in professional development). Analysis of these would assist in identifying good practices and processes.

It may also be desirable for certain journalists to apply for special accreditation so that there would be a pool of experienced and highly competent people who could be used in by-elections or other very high profile occasions. This may not be necessary, as the political parties would quickly recognise quality however it is an option that could be pursued.

#### **National PPBs**

The proposals have focussed on local access to the media so that the electorate is engaged with their local candidate and her/his views and better informed when they vote.

It would still be desirable for there to be an opportunity for parties nationally (or regionally if appropriate) to broadcast the main points of their manifesto and where to access a copy. Whilst people vote for their local candidate it is usually within the context of a political party. It is important they have the opportunity to look at both.

I would suggest that the present PPBs could continue but probably reduced in number.

Alternatively the political parties could reach agreement on a variety of formats, as at local level, which the broadcasters would then facilitate.

Additional opportunities will be provided by modern technology. With the advent of postcode broadcasting it would be possible to have an issue outlined in a well researched and highly professional documentary and then for the debate on the issue to be continued nationwide across a wide variety of local TV and radio stations with the local candidates being quizzed in front of local electors.

#### **Editorial freedom**

Over the years various commissions both here and in America have considered "fairness" in the media and have come to the conclusion that imposing rules would be an intrusion on the freedom of the press and a blow to the important role they hold within our democracy.

The recommendations I have made do not restrict the freedom of the press to choose what they wish to say, or how they wish to say it. It merely suggests that, for short periods of time, strictly limited access to others be granted.

These periods would be clearly identified as being different and outside of the editorial control of the station involved.

The legal position is therefore not really any different from the Party Political Broadcasts at present.

#### **Public Access the right of way through the airwaves**

Whilst this paper has concentrated on political candidates' access to the broadcast media, there is no need for the principles to be confined to them.

A natural progression would be to extend the system to groups who wished to have an issue debated without necessarily standing for election. Not only would this encourage engagement in the political processes, but would also avoid them standing for election when they merely wanted an issue raised rather than be elected.

It would also enable a clear linkage to be identified with political debate and political processes. Debate on issues of public concern are "politics" and, though they are not necessarily party politics, nevertheless they contribute significantly to our democracy.

It would also encourage important issues of either national or local issues to be debated in an open way separate from the control exercised by those who restrict debate by framing the question in a referendum.

Local election offices would need to be given an enhanced, albeit simple administrative, role. The right to a debate would depend on the requisite number of signature. Having achieved that then an invitation to any who wish to join the debate would be advertised. Those able to attract sufficient signatures would have the right to join the discussions to agree the form of the debate and to have their representative take a leading role.

#### **Conclusions**

The proposals within this paper are both radical and modest. They propose a right to the broadcasting channels similar to rights of way. What is suggested is very limited in application and very modest in cost yet worth millions of pounds.

They will not, of their own bring about mass participative democracy but they will re-ignite participation and strengthen local democratic processes. If critics suggest the take up small then the costs will have been commensurate with that. If, on the other hand, the take up is high then we will have reversed the decline in democratic participation.

#### **The proposals:**

- ◇ Are high value but at modest cost to the State
- ◇ Reduce the possible corrupting influence of corporate donations
- ◇ Engage the public
- ◇ Increases participation in and understanding of democratic processes
- ◇ Enable public to make informed choices about their candidates
- ◇ Give opportunities to reach sectors otherwise missed out
- ◇ Increase accountability to electorate and tends to reduce power of the whips and the influence of professional lobbyists
- ◇ Enable a diversity of views to be heard, tending to reduce power of spin-doctors

These proposals, if adopted, would also be transferable to other both mature and emerging democracies. Many countries do look to Britain as having a culture of open democracy. This country has a strong tradition, through voluntary organisations, of supporting and encouraging democratic and civil rights in many other countries. This new approach of Political Access Broadcasting would teach us lessons of public participation in the democratic processes that could be passed on.

The ability of the public should not be underestimated. In Wyre Forest we elected an independent MP. The people of Kidderminster and surrounding towns and villages know what the closure of their hospital would do and they understand the issues surrounding it.

In the mid-eighties a famous by election debate at a sixth form changed the course of the campaign and meant that the favourite, an SDP candidate, slumped badly.

Such examples are, however, few and far between. Their rarity indicates a serious decline in local democratic debate and local accountability and a worrying increase in centralised diktat. Political Access Broadcasting could play an important role in reversing those trends.

Rob Wheway

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## Appendix A

Political Access Broadcasting options for consideration:

The following are suggestions only. The author is not a media professional, however they do give an idea of the range that could be considered. The author has every confidence that broadcasters have the ability to increase the possibilities and present them in ways that are interesting.

- ◇ Public debate broadcast from community facility
- ◇ Edited highlights from public debate
- ◇ Studio debate (with or without studio audience)
- ◇ Interview between gaps in music programme
- ◇ Chat show style
- ◇ Mini documentary with candidate in constituency
- ◇ Phone-in programme (individual candidates or group)
- ◇ Voice to camera with graphics

## APPENDIX B

### Disengaged groups

Deliberate efforts could be made by the broadcasters to reach low participating sectors of the population.

Some suggestions of venues or target audiences are made below:

- ◇ Community centre on council/social housing estate
- ◇ School, youth facility
- ◇ Workers' canteen at lunchtime
- ◇ Unemployed at jobcentre
- ◇ Centre used by a specific minority
- ◇ Religious meeting place
- ◇ Social club or public house
- ◇ Parents' group