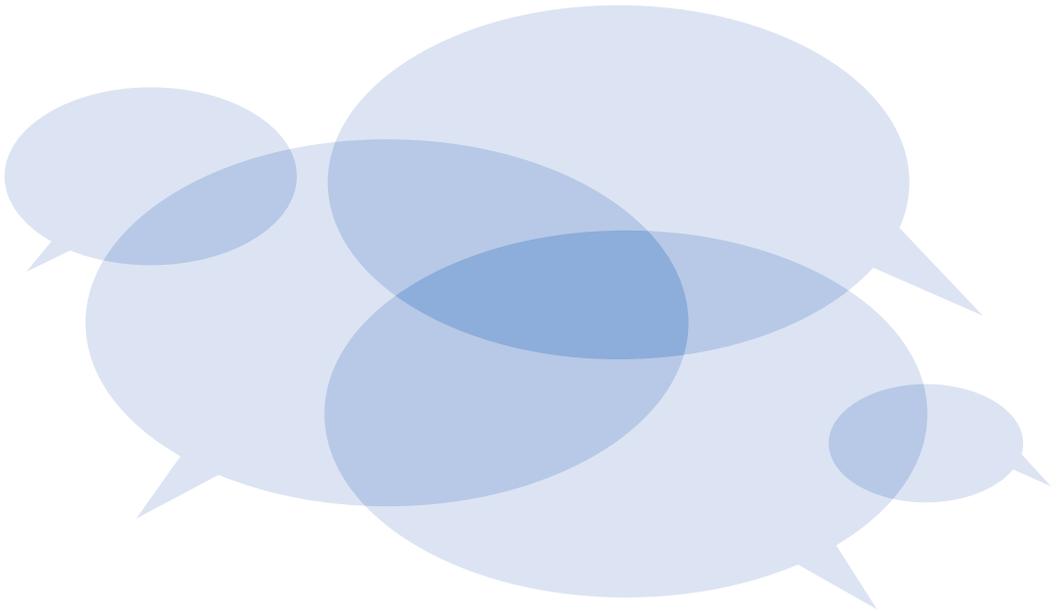


'Beyond the Soundbite'

BBC research into public disillusion
with politics



FOREWORD

2001's General Election saw the lowest voter turnout since the war. Although it is not the BBC's purpose to make people vote, there are strong indications that those people who did not vote are the same people who rarely watch or listen to any of our political coverage. That is why the BBC commissioned research to better understand how these groups - broadly speaking, those under 45 from lower socio-economic groups - relate to politics.

Usually, BBC research is not published. However, this work has generated a lot of interest because it contributes to a broader debate currently happening among politicians, academics and opinion formers about the significance of the low turnout and the worrying disengagement of many younger voters. The BBC findings, which are based on both quantitative and qualitative work, are reasonably representative of the views of many voters and non-voters under 45. And while not as extensive as other research in this field, interestingly our results do resonate with many of the findings of more in-depth work.

For example, there is plenty of evidence of the growth of cynicism and disengagement among the electorate. The British Social Attitudes Survey shows that the percentage of people who trust the government to put the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party has dropped to a new low of 16 per cent in 2000 compared to 39 per cent in 1974. In the British Election Survey of the 2001 election, only 51 per cent of 26-35 year olds felt it was a serious neglect of their civic duty not to vote, compared to 86 per cent of over 65s. In the same survey, an analysis of factors affecting the probability of people voting suggests that class is a far less important factor now than an evaluation of costs and benefits for an individual. These studies suggest a clear trend away from class-based, party political structures to a more individualised, 'marketised' approach to politics.

However, echoing the BBC research, the picture is not whole-heartedly gloomy. The MORI Chairman Bob Worcester points out in his book on the 2001 election that the number of people who claimed to be 'very interested in politics' was the same as twenty years ago. Furthermore, figures on political action published by the British Social Attitudes Survey suggest an even greater level of political activity than the BBC research.

So our research complements a wider mosaic of analysis and, one hopes, adds a few insights of its own. The broad conclusion is that young people are not apathetic - they are a new force, 'savvy consumers', who want answers and solutions; who feel they have a right to have a say and for their voice to be heard; who will not simply accept what is given to them unless it is what they want. They are disenchanted with traditional institutions and Westminster seems increasingly outdated and irrelevant to them. And the younger they are, the stronger is the sense of disengagement and disillusion.

The message for the BBC is that, like Westminster, we haven't kept in step with the issues that matter to the people, and so we too can appear less relevant. People see politics and political coverage as being mainly about white, middle class, middle-aged men being badgered by other white, middle class, middle-aged men in a secret shared language. It's a symbol of the new political divide: it's no longer 'left and right', it's now 'us and them', and there is a perception that the BBC is part of 'them' along with the politicians and the rest of the establishment.

The research company, The Research Business International (TRBI), made their own recommendations about how the BBC might respond to their findings. These are now being evaluated within a broader process of consultation, which will feed into ongoing work aimed at keeping BBC programming fresh and relevant.

The point of the research and the current BBC initiative on politics is not to focus on individual programmes. Rather, the emphasis is on understanding how a large section of younger people today relate to politics, and therefore how we can better engage them through our programming. And we shouldn't forget that for an older audience, our current programming continues to do a good job.

Sian Kevill
Head, BBC New Politics Initiative

February 2002

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PART I - TRBI RESEARCH FINDINGS

I. The background to this research project

- The turnout for the 2001 General Election was the lowest since World War 2.
- There is a noticeable trend towards mainstream political apathy.
- A disconnection is evident between the current party political system and the growth of interest in single issues.
- Party boundaries in the political arena have blurred to the point of overlap.

From these and other issues, a strong hypothesis was developed by the BBC that:

‘neither politicians nor the media are truly in step with the political mood of the nation’.

In the Autumn of 2001, the BBC commissioned The Research Business International to conduct research to explore the disengagement of a generation under 45 from politics and the democratic process and what broadcasters might do to re-engage them with politics.

The overall objective of this piece of research was:

‘to take a snapshot of the current political context for 16-44 year olds exploring their issues, their beliefs, attitudes and reference points, generating insights and hypotheses to be discussed at a BBC conference in November 2001.’

The programme of research combined both qualitative discussion groups to understand the ‘whys’ and ‘hows’ of the issue, and a quantitative study amongst 400 nationally representative 16-44 year olds to gather some firm figures on opinions.

2. A summary of the research findings

Are we de-politicised?

- No
- There is broad consensus across 18-44 year olds that the power of political opinion and beliefs can shape our futures.

Are we disinterested?

- No
- Single issue politics is salient and relevant for every individual we spoke to.

Are we disillusioned ?

- Yes
- The current political process and its media coverage gives us output, but **not** outcomes.

Are we disconnected?

- Yes
- There is no (physical or emotional) framework or pathway for accessing Westminster.
- Many people do not know or see the means of a two-way dialogue between Parliament and the electorate.

Key Findings

- Many people find it difficult to relate politics and its presentation to their everyday lives.
- As the State's intervention in people's lives has 'rolled back', the sense of a real two way dialogue between Parliament and the people has simultaneously diminished.
- More choices in a fast-moving world mean a vote every four years is perceived as a 'poor deal', even archaic, for today's consumer-savvy electorate.
- People are increasingly utilizing consumer values and techniques to evaluate their relationship with politics and politicians e.g. choice, service, accountability.
- More media, in all forms, can mean more coverage but less clarity; more discussion of the small-print and less clear communication of the basic facts and the bigger picture.
- Many people do not have a grasp of the basics of on-going political and news issues e.g. Middle East, Northern Ireland, Europe, or even democracy's structure and workings.
- For many people, news and politics are impenetrable discourses or lexicons: not on their level, not empathizing, not talking their language.
- People are looking to broadcasting for greater empathy and understanding of their needs and knowledge levels.
- Currently news and political broadcasting lacks a tier of entry points to engage or re-engage people.

3. Focus groups characteristics: an overview

One of the most interesting findings of this research emerged very quickly in analysis.

Separate teams of researchers conducted the 18-24 year-old and 25-44 year-old discussion groups. What surprised the researchers was how similarly the groups viewed and felt about the political landscape and its coverage in TV news and other media.

The only differences were contextual: lifestage issues.

Four different voter types were interviewed in each age range.

A. Active non-voters

- Despite having voted in previous general elections, these people decided to abstain in 2001.
- This conscious decision was taken for a number of reasons:
 - The result at both national and local levels was a **foregone conclusion**. There was no alternative to New Labour.
 - There was **no new news**. Party policies seemed to be the same as last time. There were no fresh perspectives or solutions offered.
 - Non-voters are often **issue champions**. There is no perceived correlation between how important things are to them and the agenda of the powers that be.
- They feel **disempowered**
- For a number of them, **Proportional Representation** is a desired way forward, for Parliament to represent the nation more closely.

B. Ambivalent non-voters

*'I wouldn't say coming here to talk about politics is the highest point in my life.
I'd rather go and talk about football for 3 hours.'*

Man, 37, Hertfordshire

- They are **indifferent** to politics. Some of these people had **never voted**.
- Yet they are **issue involved and issue sensitive**. Politics however seems incredibly distant from their immediate, local life experience.
- **A number were actively 'giving back' to society** supporting community and society e.g. voluntary work:- rape, drugs and alcohol counselling, and assisting the elderly.
- A collective spirit was evident amongst a significant number: **A sense of pride exists in being one of the 40% who did not vote**.
- Many expressed a desire for an **abstention/none of the above box** to openly declare their frustration with the political process.

C. Voters

- Broad consensus exists amongst these people that it is **morally wrong not to vote. Non-voters frustrate them.**
- Many are **consciously resisting the apathy** that surrounds contemporary politics, and feeling it to varying degrees themselves.
 - It was described as a **'frustrating duty'** by a woman in the 18-24 year Leeds group, who voted in 2001.
- They are **fully aware of politics' increasing retreat** from personal and social debate and discussion as culture ascends in 'importance' and relevance.
- They are **looking for answers.**
- They are **frustrated by media presentation** of political issues.
 - The media often **'muddies the water'** when they are looking for validation of their vote or some clarity as to what the alternatives are.
- They were also frustrated that the **election was a foregone conclusion** and that we have, seemingly, a one-party democracy.

D. Issue Active

- **All of these people had voted** in the 2001 Election.
- A significant number worked in **public sector** or socially responsible jobs such as health, education, caring.
- While unified by a championing of the need for more social responsibility by the electorate as a whole, **their involvement with certain issues, was frequently based on personal needs and experiences** e.g.
 - Speed bumps in their road campaigning
 - Support for dyslexic children (including their own)
 - Union active re: pay and conditions
 - Had moved jobs from the commercial world to charity.
- These people are **'doers'. There was strong and positive recall of a woman confronting Blair about the NHS during the election.**
 - Her directness - cutting through the bureaucracy, was to be admired and highlighted the gulf perceived to exist between the electorate and elected.
- **Self-motivated and focused they readily voice concerns over both politicians and the media.**
 - Politicians are felt to lack both honesty and genuine accountability.
 - The media is felt to put a 'slant' on both politics and issues, approaching it, in some cases, cynically and negatively: resigned to never getting the truth.
- Alternative democratic models are of interest. The idea of voting on specific issues / referendums is very salient.

4. What ‘politics’ means to people

‘We are passionate about these issues but it’s frustrating because you can’t do anything about it, about these things that affect our lives every single minute of the day. Everyone has become so disillusioned with politics - it’s bland, boring and corrupt.’

Woman, 25-44, Leeds.

The quantitative chart below shows the variety of associations people came up with when asked what politics meant to them. The majority of people came up with associations which are descriptive or ‘neutral’. Worryingly, a significant number are negative, even cynical (39%).

The lower the social class and the younger the respondent, the less represented they feel in the political arena. The percentage of non-voters giving negative responses, not unsurprisingly, is even higher at 49 %.

People clearly feel emotionally distant from the political process and politicians, who are felt to be self-serving, rather than public servants.

The answers listed in the chart below were unprompted. The responses were subsequently grouped into categories and in each we have included a selection of the comments with the percentages of those expressing them. The aggregate of these figures is not 100 % because people gave more than one answer.

What does the word ‘politics’ mean to you?

Neutral Associations (net) 69%

Functional elements

Government	22%
Politicians	8%
Parliament	6%
Tony Blair/Prime Minister	5%
Election/voting	5%
Political parties	4%

Purpose

Running/governing the country	18%
Rules/regulations	8%
Economy/budgets/taxes	7%
Law and order	4%

Role

Discussions/debates/decisions	7%
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Political parties

Labour	5%
Conservative	4%

Negative Associations (net) 39%

Politicians - Negative

Crooks/criminals/corruption	6%
Politicians all out for themselves	6%
Liars (ignoring the truth)	6%
They’re overpaid	4%

Mistrust/scepticism

Don’t care about ordinary people	4%
No action/things never get done	4%

Not interested

Boring	6%
Not interested	5%

Waste of time

Bullshit/rubbish	4%
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Base: All respondents 16-44

5. The public-political relationship

In the quantitative survey we asked people to choose from a number of words describing their ability to make a stand about something that concerns them. Again they were allowed to choose more than one. The majority felt powerless or unable to make a difference.

Negative		Positive	
Unable to make a difference	37%	Able to make a difference	34%
Powerless	36%	Represented	12%
Unsupported	19%	Empowered	7%
Unrepresented	15%	Not interested	5%

Base: all respondents

From our focus groups, there was also a strongly embedded disconnect in the public's mind between their perceptions of politics and the issues that affect them personally.

'Politics': Knee-Jerk Responses

'Sleaze Blokes in suits looking after themselves.'

Man, 18, Leeds

In all groups, 'politics' was spontaneously loaded with negative connotations. People attributed this not just to the behaviour of politicians, but also the behaviour of the media as a whole. The hard line often taken by the media in calling politicians to account can demonize politicians as a whole: we only hear about the bad ones. But respondents also recognised the paradox that the media needs to 'sell', and that sleaze sells.

However in some cases, the public like to see that those distant figures in power are human like them: it closes the chasm between elected and elector.

One of the most, if not *the* most resonant image of the 2001 election was Prescott punching an egg thrower. There was a significant consensus in the research groups that he did the right thing.

Another criticism levelled at politicians is that they are not 'experienced' people. The over-riding perception of MPs is that they are privileged types.

Certain class stereotypes can come into play for some, but there was a clear consensus that politicians - as a generality - are thought of as self-serving 'political animals' who have little grasp of the real world and the needs and feelings of everyday people.

'You show me a politician that is not well off and isn't from a Public School background. It'd be rare to find that many that are from a 'people' background, where they have actually suffered from one or two of the issues that they talk about.'

Man, 25-44, Herts

The final strong spontaneous association is that content and style is universally the same regardless of the MP or party. The style and tone of the parties is perceived to be an insufferable constant, whatever the issue, whoever the 'suit'.

'Politics' - Considered responses

Beyond the initial bombardment of negatives that focus on media presentation and politicians, the political process itself, becomes a cause for concern.

Here is an institution that permeates everyday lives, yet we only get our say every 4 years.

When we asked 'How well do you think Parliament represents your views on political issues? Very well, fairly well, not very well, not at all well', 45 % of 16-44s felt it is not really delivering as well as it should be in terms of representing the people's views, compared to 43% who felt they were represented (13% didn't know). However, only 2% felt their views very well represented. Those in social classes ABC1s were most favourable: 52% v 42% for C2DEs.

The quantitative chart below shows the variety of associations people came up with unprompted when asked what 'parliament' meant to them. Again, the aggregate of these figures is not 100 % because people gave more than one answer.

What does the 'Parliament' mean to you?	
Neutral Associations (net) 72%	Negative Associations (net) 25%
Political assembly point	Politicians - Negative
Where they go to discuss issues 18%	People falling asleep 4%
Meeting place for politicians 12%	Wages too high/overpaid 3%
Where they make decisions 10%	Mistrust/cynical
Meeting place for people 7%	They don't do anything 4%
All MPs getting together 6%	Not interested 3%
Non-specific description	Non specific - negative 2%
House of Commons 7%	
House of Lords 7%	
Houses of Parliament 5%	
Government 4%	
Role of parliament	
Make laws/rules/regulations 14%	
Seat of government 5%	
Tradition, history, heritage 4%	
Political figureheads 4%	
<i>Base: All respondents 16-44</i>	

In the focus groups there was a sense that parliament was reliable only for being a disappointment, be it a misjudged strategy or declining public service. There's never any good news bar interest rate cuts and the public feel they can take a lot of the credit for this due to their own commercial efforts.

Parliament lacks a contemporary personality. It's seen as boring, old fashioned and formal, dating from a deferential age when people would stop and listen to those '*better and wiser*'. For our younger groups, time-honoured procedures communicate not revered tradition, but a refusal to accept that times change. Furthermore, they no longer feel respect for parliament but morally superior to those who seem to have forgotten that they are there to serve the people.

Finally and crucially, there is a groundswell of feeling that **the current political process holds little value**. Thus the 40% who did not vote sleep easy.

'Trust is the foundation of a relationship. If you have got no trust then you have no relationship. If you don't trust your government then you're not going to vote for them.'

Woman, 25-44, Leeds

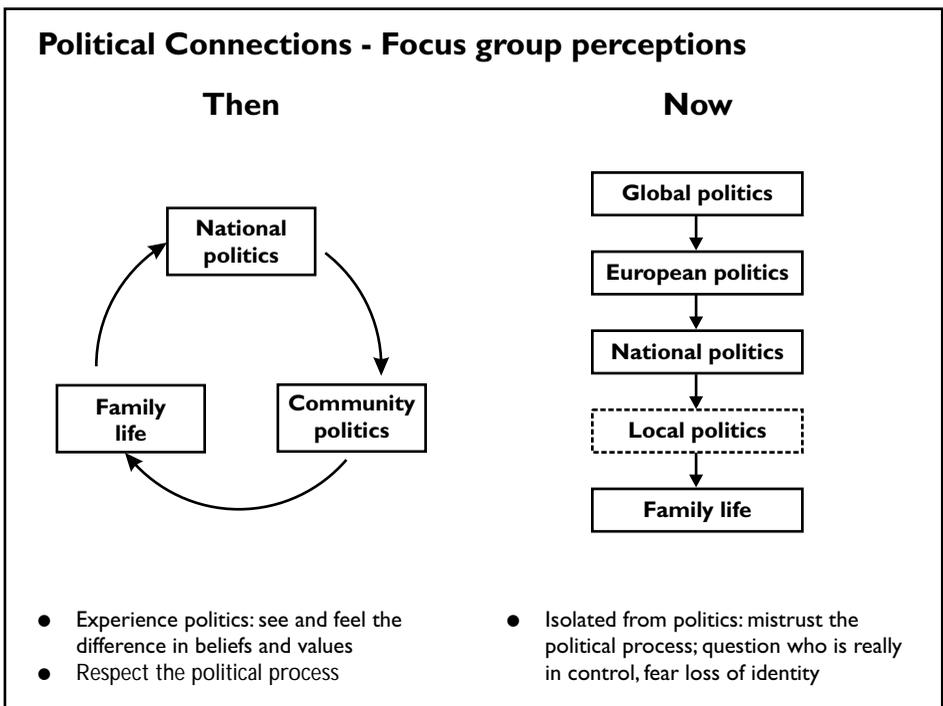
6. Why so disconnected?

'We are more self-sufficient now. We don't rely on the state any more. We have a pension to look after our future, we all try and look after ourselves. If you really want a job, even if it's working in McDonalds, you can get a job, look after yourself and you can start to think what do I need to vote for that idiot for anyway, I'm doing quite all right by myself at the moment.'

Man, 25-44, Herts

Part of our research methodology was generational interviews involving children, parents and grandparents.

Beyond the rose-tinted nostalgia of past, simpler times it became very clear how the structure of political connections for the electorate has changed, becoming less relevant and more distant.



Our older interviewees described a time back ‘then’, call it 20-30 years ago, when there were 3 clear and distinct connection points with politics, operating cyclically

- **National Politics**
- **Community Politics**
- **Family Life**

The first was **family life**. More time spent together as a family unit meant more discussion and the passing down of values and beliefs. The individual's existence, they felt, was physically more local. You were born in a location, you lived and worked there, you died there. It gave you your identity, a sense of self and of reassurance.

In the past, politics existed at a **national level**. The House spoke and people listened. These people ran the country. The buck stopped with them. Perhaps the reality was very different, but the over-riding feeling was that your MP was a local person, a pillar of the community who lived around the corner, knew the area and knew the needs and feelings of his constituents. A business man or union man, he would have a vested interest. He would care for his roots, he would knock on doors to be known to all and to listen to people's needs and concerns

The third and final connection point was **community politics**, a combination of local government implementing laws, and local community spirit; pulling together, looking out for each other, helping each other.

These three connection points were felt to work simply and cyclically to move the country on and develop our nation, belonging and community.

The ‘Now’ model is very different

- **Global Politics**
- **European Politics**
- **National Politics**
- *Local Politics*
- **Family Life**

The contemporary connection points are more distant, and the cycle of the previously simple process of politics has been shifted away from the people.

They feel at the receiving end of a one-way process which imposes on them, even from beyond our nation's border. Their sense of disconnection stems from a feeling of powerlessness and the inability to make a difference.

Family Life is a shadow of what it was. Their ability to influence anything ends at their front door.

‘You can’t possibly do things that will influence what’s happening around you so what you do is look after yourself because no-one else will. Maybe if you can help other people in the process you do but there’s not a lot you can do.’

Woman, 40, Leeds

‘We’re insular, not really bothered about helping next door, as long as my family is happy that’s it. I can only have an effect on my children and immediate friends.’

Man, 42, Herts.

People don't feel involved with politics, their local voice seems to have gone.

Dramatic changes in living patterns due to work demands, travel, and family structures mean the basis for establishing a strong regionally based identity has fallen away.

'I always believed I would be part of a community. I've back-packed all over the world and lived in different places. I've never known anywhere so disjointed as where I am now. I really believed that you do your bit for where you lived and therefore work together, but in the last couple of years I've just become gloomy and negative'

Woman, 25, Birmingham

'I would argue now that there is no such thing as even a family unit'

Man, 25-44, Herts.

'People used to be on the same wavelength, they didn't move out of their area, the horizons weren't so broadly set and they just knew what they knew and they were satisfied. Now they are not'

Man, 42, Herts.

The MPs representing the electorate have changed. Our groups believed they are now often career MPs, not locals done good. Outsiders with no knowledge of the needs of the area are farmed in. A political connection point is made redundant.

'Labour MPs used to live down your street not in some big house in Surrey, they lived down your street and you knew them, you'd maybe gone to school with them or you knew their family. They are so remote now - even the local politicians are remote to me.'

Man, 25-44, Herts.

Where the most distant connection point was your MP in Parliament, now it is **Global Politics** and an agenda out of the individuals' reach and control, beyond their vote. This causes mistrust of the process. Who is really in control of the individual's everyday life? How are they accountable to me?

Then we have **European Politics**. When we asked people who their Euro MP is, many didn't know they had one. The strongest current associations with the European Parliament's impact on British life are the greengrocer being fined for using only imperial measurements and endless debate on a form of currency we don't actually have.

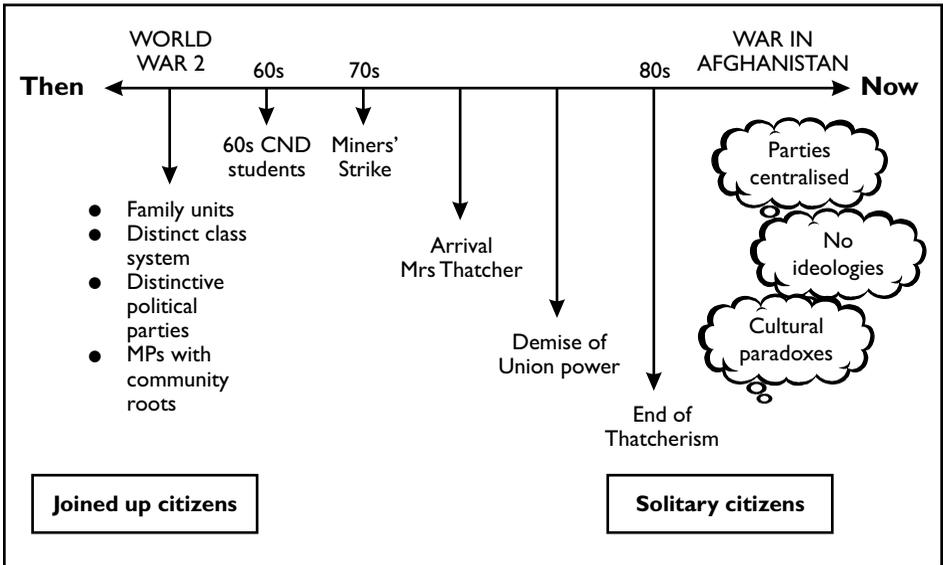
Then it seems **National Politics** comes into the frame and at last political news starts to become a bit more relevant and involving. However very few knew who represented them at this level.

The final point of engagement is **Local Politics**, a hazy connection rapidly fading and increasingly impotent as government seemingly becomes more centralized. This perception may be different in Scotland and Wales where aspects of government have recently been devolved, but for our English focus groups, this decline of local politics means that a significant contribution to community politics has disappeared. The electorate appears isolated and left to fend for themselves.

'I don't really see the connection, you know about local councils and then it just sort of stops and becomes party leaders. I don't see the connection between the two.'

Woman, 25-44, Leeds

7. Where did we disconnect? - focus group perceptions



We asked our focus groups to recall political events that had influenced or impacted on their lives. The timeline chart they drew up is impressionistic - many of the events and dates are wrong. But it is clear that in people's minds politics ended with the end of Thatcherism.

Since then the political world has become nebulous and unclear. Parties feel centralized and distant; ideologies have disappeared to be replaced by single issue campaigning which doesn't bear any relation to the old class-based politics of left and right. In addition people talked of increasing cultural paradoxes and political discourse failing to range across the problems that affect their lives.

'We're forever apologising for the mistakes of our forefathers and I think it does get used by different communities in Britain. We have become so disenfranchised from the system here we feel we can't say what we think.'

Woman, 25-44, Leeds

8. Issues versus Politics

Taking action over issues

39% have taken some form of action in last 12 months

Signed a petition	33%	Contacted school	3%
Wrote a letter of complaint	20%	Stopped buying French products	2%
Boycotted product/company	8%	Boycotted anything tested on animals	2%
Attended a meeting	8%	Joined a Union	2%
Contacted council/councillor	6%	Boycotted Gap	2%
Contacted MP/Politician	4%	Contact Department of Transport	1%
Made telephone call	3%	Boycotted McDonald's	1%
Protested/Demonstrated	3%		

Base: All 16-44s taking action (n=152)

For all the cynicism and disconnection from politics, when we asked people what issues were important to them and where and how things that affected their every day lives needed to change, the floodgates opened. The answers listed in the chart below were unprompted. Again, the aggregate of these figures is not 100 % because some people gave more than one answer.

Salient topics abound many of which are inextricably linked to local and central government. Yet they perceived a lack of 'channels' through which to express their views. There was no means of formalising or institutionalising their displeasure and concerns, and therefore no means of connecting to the lexicon of politics.

We asked respondents on what basis they would become more involved:

Solutions to Increased Involvement?

I would get more involved if.....

- I thought my contributions made a difference (24%)
- I knew where to start (19%)
- I thought anyone would listen (12%)
- I saw others getting more involved (10%)
- I felt more confident in the government (9%)
- I had more respect for politicians (8%)
- I knew who to contact (7%)
- If the media were more independent (2%)

Base: all respondents 16-44

'I don't think we are de-politicised, I think everyone has their level of politicisation and they believe what they want to believe ... you could be the most political person in the world but you just don't feel you have anywhere to go with it'

Man, 25-44, Herts.

In these self- focused and self-reliant times people are prepared to take action over issues but they do not spontaneously perceive this as being political. In fact 39% of our 16-44 sample had taken some form of action over the past 12 months.

Issues are broadly immediate, affecting their everyday lives and/or emotive, be it local town planning or campaigning on third world debt.

Of course, many did not take action, but did engage with those passionate about and unwaveringly committed to issues, a prime example being charity organizations: single-minded campaigners and pressure groups. Again there is a disconnect issue. Charities for all but the most ardent supporter are not readily perceived to be part of the political process.

What are the issues?

Issues are widespread and varied

Education	6%	Anti closure of local hospital	2%
Cruelty to animals	4%	Local transport	2%
State of NHS	4%	Anti war	2%
Anti-terrorism	4%	Local parking	2%
Planning application	3%	Foot & Mouth	1%
Street crime	3%	Save the pound	1%
Fox hunting	3%	Proposed Park & Ride scheme	1%
Cruelty to children	3%	Noise pollution	1%
Local roads	2%	Pro-life	1%

Base: All respondents 18-44 taking action (n=152). Respondents could give more than one action.

9. The media, politics and heroes

We started off this area of discussion by asking people to identify who are the past's and today's political heroes?

The response from our sample was underwhelming. Churchill stood out unsurprisingly, as did Thatcher for some, though just as many regarded her as the opposite. Most disturbing, considering the media's size and output, few candidates emerged from more recent times.

In our focus groups, a hero or heroine had to have human characteristics, something lacking in a lot of political coverage. Politicians, they felt, could be more informal and colloquial, and offer a sense of their real life and everyday experience.

'Politicians are so animated you always feel there's someone behind them with their hand up their backside telling them what to say, what to do, when to smile, you never feel as if a politician is a real person.'

Man, 19, Brighton

A political hero will be driven by a sense of injustice in the world and have the strength of character to transcend the restrictive parameters of the party line. They should speak their mind and speak from the heart, not the spun statement. They will often feel passionately about a specific single issue rather than be opportunistic like the career politician.

Overall they will be committed to showing us and giving us a solution to a problem, sticking with it, seeing it through.

The clearest example of a modern day hero to our respondents was political and empathetic, but not a politician. Bob Geldof and the Live Aid legacy still resonate strongly. He cared and made things happen, when those in power failed to connect with the mood of a nation.

People these days want people, not politicians to be representing them. However, a few politicians did have that sort of appeal. Mo Mowlam received significant praise. Here was a woman with one of the most difficult tasks in government (Northern Ireland), suffering illness and yet still not afraid to speak out of turn and truly express herself. Here was a person people could identify with, feel for, and respect.

'Mo Mowlam wasn't all that to look at, not someone who was glamorous ... she had her own problems and I always felt she used to say things that not everyone agreed with and I used to think 'good for you', that is a politician to me'

Woman, 34, Leeds

Ann Widdecombe, though to a lesser extent, also commanded respect. Even though her views and opinions were not bought into wholesale, her ability to take on her opponents was to be admired.

'I don't agree with everything that Ann Widdecombe thinks, but regardless of all the ridicule she puts up with, she stands up ... and she wipes the floor with them. Whether you agree or not with her is another thing but you have to admire her'

Woman, 31, Herts.

10. Consumer culture versus politics

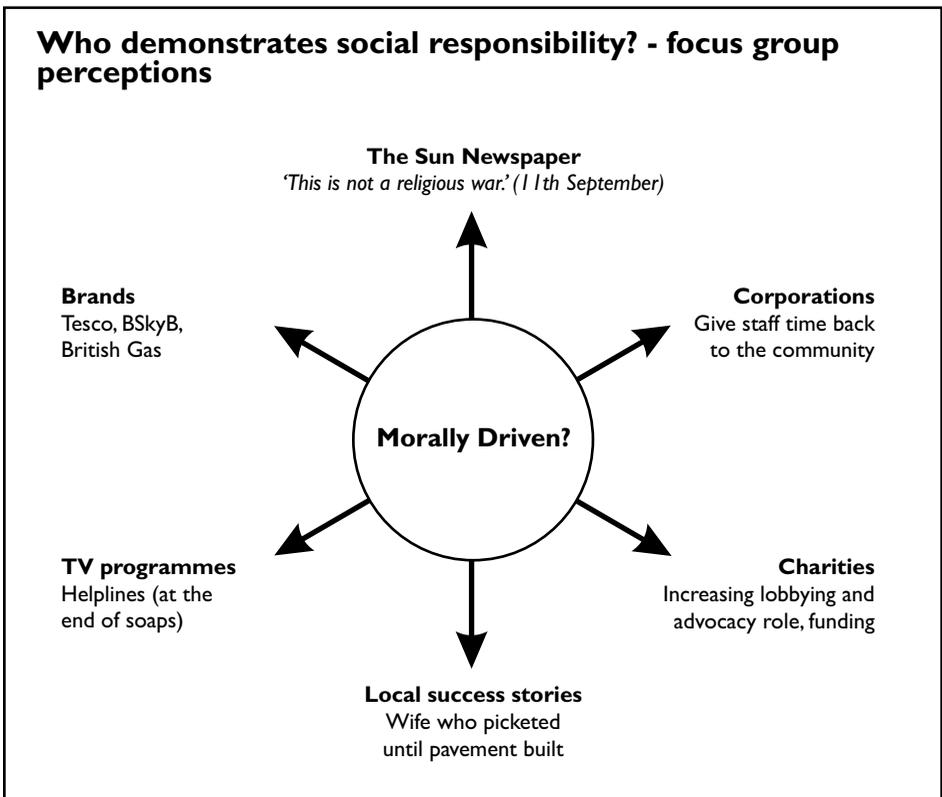
One of the clearest findings of the research is that the public are using consumer values to evaluate their relationship with politics and politicians. We have higher expectations than ever before.

Many people in our groups were clearly influenced in their view of politics by consumer culture. It is second-nature to them that the customer is always right and the consumer is readily supplied by brands with efficiency, choice, quality, service and accountability.

People use their relationships with brands to evaluate politics and politicians:

- are they likeable?
- do they work properly?
- do they empathise?

When we asked who demonstrated social responsibility nowadays, politicians didn't figure at all, but brand names and companies that had schemes to improve the local community, were clearly known and appreciated, e.g. Tesco's vouchers for schools; British Gas' work with Help the Aged.



Brands have been ahead of the curve in spotting the gaps in life left by social and economic change and have capitalised on them to varying degrees of success. They have set out to foster an image of social conscience and responsibility; and to promote feelings of belonging, community and values.

But as brands have been on the ascendancy, the State has receded from public life, becoming increasingly recessive, faceless and seemingly irrelevant. Compared to their experience of brands and commerce and the functional and emotional benefits they offer, encounters with the State and the workings of our country commonly aren't a pleasure; be it a personal, family or friend's experience of the state via ill health, a crime, or a tax return form.

Furthermore, our respondents didn't trust politicians or politics to get things done. Consumers can influence brands constantly. If a product disappoints, you can walk away; stop buying it; even bad mouth it. Or go to *Watchdog* and watch them apologise and make amends. In politics, the only chance to affect things comes round once every four years.

'Politicians should be accountable. If they ran a company and they really screwed up, the bloke in charge would look at it and say they're out the door, take your P45.'

Man, 35, Herts.

People haven't so much walked away from politics as lost the means of engaging. For many, politics has not targeted them; communicated that it is for them as much as the more dedicated followers of the affairs of state. Currently there is a sense that not everyone's vote matters.

Successful brands aim to contribute to the individual's identity and sense of self, because people increasingly buy brands that align with their needs and values, or represent their aspirations.

Politics for many is not perceived to consist of people like them or people who fairly represent them. Politicians do not appear to be functionally achieving, doing what people want, or emotionally engaging.

'I do think that they have to earn the right for us to vote. Just because you have a voucher, you don't always spend it if the goods aren't worthwhile.'

Woman, 25-44, Leeds.

11. Politics is a negative brand?

Currently, politics seems to offer no real choice for today's disenchanted electorate. The shift to the centre by the main parties means for many people not reassuring consensus, but **'they're all as bad as each other'** and that **'they have no ideas of their own'**, as an 18-year male student from Brighton put it.

Again, we have to think here about consumer culture. In so many markets, indistinguishable products compete for consumers' money. Brands which work, create different values and their own unique personality aiming to make us feel as though we have made the right choice for ourselves. Successful brands work hard to create clear meaning.

By contrast, recent election campaigns have become infamous for their negative campaigning. Amongst our respondents, the most memorable image of the campaign was a Labour poster of William Hague with a Thatcher hairdo. It left our group with no sense of what Labour believes in or stands for.

Many felt that on TV, politicians are always taking a dig at the opposition or disagreeing unconstructively, and that this over time is devaluing politics. Politicians are further belittling it by not stating what they stand for, believe in or feel. This makes politics less engaging to many, and even redundant to some.

The parties have become insular, locked into their own world. This provoked a sense of moral anger among some respondents who felt the politicians had lost touch with the fact that it is ordinary people who justify the democratic system and the very existence of MPs.

'They're just a bunch of little kids squabbling in the playground.'

Male, 25-44, Birmingham

PART II - TRBI RECOMMENDATIONS

I. Political needs within media

TRBI identified five themes that emerged from the research around how programming could develop for those unengaged by current political coverage.

- **Programming needed for all**

- more varied presentation styles, a more colloquial tone.

- **Educate people up to speed**

- Answer the ‘how did we get here?’ questions in peoples’ minds, covering off all sides of the debate.

- **Public Input**

- Break the current discourse or lexicon of politics by injecting into it the needs, concerns and voice of real people.
- Allow them to air their views in formalized constructive debate.

- **Accountability**

- The accent on current news and political broadcasting is on process more than results
- People want to see outcomes.
- Tangible evidence desired e.g. NHS spend figures are meaningless without translation into concrete means for judging performance on beds, operations etc.
- Update people via local news i.e. what it means to them and their area.
- Transparency from the national headline through to local impact desired.

- **Put issues into the mainstream/close the gap**

- Engage and inform via less traditional means: humour/satire.
- Allow politics to become emotive as well as functional.
- Humanise politicians - create space for their personality.
- Tone down trivialization/scandalizing of politicians: they are not celebrities, they are servants of the people.

Gaps within Media Coverage

- Youth (15-19) are under-catered for. Newsround is respected but only goes so far.
- For the under 45s, a ‘bridging’ opportunity exists for a programme to fit between young and old.
 - clear and basic in terms of information and more colloquial in tone i.e. accessible for all.
- Adults are often playing catch-up as they get older
 - Big issues: Northern Ireland, Middle East, democracy etc require simple explanation.
 - 2 way dialogues, satire and investigative journalism would motivate more engagement.
- There is some desire to discover the real informal person beyond the politician via a humorous and intelligent interviewer.

2. The big idea - Relaunching democracy

Our research suggests that for a sizeable chunk of the electorate, democracy is not working hard enough to engage them. For many, none of the political parties stand for anything seemingly concrete. **'We might has well have one party'** is how one 19-year old male student from Brighton put it.

Democracy is viewed simplistically yet reassuringly by the electorate to be a system of government offering

- Representation
- Choice
- Accountability

These three needs are currently not seen as being met nearly enough.

To relaunch democracy may sound too dramatic, but our research strongly suggests that a shot in the arm is needed to make a large section of the electorate realise the value of democracy and re-appraise what is currently perceived to be 'a bunch of self-serving dispassionate gray suits sitting around in a stunning if archaic building, intent on agreeing to disagree'.

The BBC is in a strong position to help turn around political disconnection.

But first it must accept that its uniqueness in both funding and stature could be a weakness as much as a strength. It can often be perceived as part of the establishment, too intimate with power to be an independent and objective commentator or on the side of the people. It can feel aloof and distant from them.

In our view, the BBC needs to shift this establishment emphasis. Like the politicians, it needs to get back in touch with how the public are feeling, how they are living, their issue-led beliefs, their hopes and fears. This is not about dumbing down, it's about making politics more accessible for all.

With its public service remit, the BBC, we believe, is in a unique position to fulfill the fundamental objective of re-democratizing democracy, to make it work and make it valued.

3. A snapshot of contemporary news consumption - a TRBI scenario

The task of re-engaging the groups of disengaged and disillusioned voters who were the target of the research, will not be not easy. Based on our focus group feedback, TRBI has created a generic scenario as an illustration of the negative mindset which is at the heart of the current problems besetting politics and political coverage.

'Exhausted by the demands of working life, a worker arrives home and flicks on the news. The headlines tell of mistakes, blunders, gaffes and crimes. A spokesman for government /ministry/whatever comes on screen to express a view on a news item that has shocked the tired worker.

The spokesman won't answer the questions. He's guarded in his response seemingly not wanting to step out of line, a line drawn by someone behind the scenes.

He won't be drawn on the 'individual case' as he 'couldn't possibly comment' and encourages the viewer to 'look at the bigger picture' and assures him that a huge amount of taxpayers' money is being thrown at the problem, and that this is more than the previous government allocated to it.

The tired worker can't believe it. Someone died and the spokesman 'won't comment' and express himself. The tired worker wants to know how the spokesman feels about this tragedy. Whether he cares.

Frustrated, the worker decides it's 'me time' after the strains of the day where they worked hard. Despite all their efforts in their chosen line of work, the country appears to be going downhill, run badly and uncaringly.

They flick channels for the sports round-up or celebrity gossip:- news that informs entertains and engages.

They immerse themselves in culture that respects them, is real and truthful.

Later on they may turn onto the news again to see what the opposition say to the earlier spokesman's objective fence sitting.

This spokesman, rather than stating what he believes, feels or stands for with regards to the news story, dedicates his time to slating the government.

Thus our viewer absorbs a little news and political opinion. He now has a very negative definition of the government's perspective on the issue, but no idea what the opposition stand for. This not the best means of garnering opinions and communicating that democracy empowers choice.

Over time, the viewer is left with a very negative perception of what government and democracy actually is. It is something seemingly without meaning, values or choices.'

Research Details

In the Autumn of 2001, the BBC commissioned The Research Business International to commence a programme of research to explore the disengagement of a generation under 45, from politics and the democratic process and what broadcasters might do to re-engage them with politics.

Research was conducted in October 2001.

It combined both qualitative discussion groups to understand the 'whys and 'hows' of the issue, and a quantitative study to gather some firm figures on opinions.

Qualitative Research

We conducted:

- 4 discussion groups with 18-24 year olds
- 4 discussion groups with 25-44 year olds
- In each age break we spoke to 1 group each of
 - active voters
 - ambivalent non-voters
 - active non-voters
 - single issue active individuals
- 4 generational family interviews
 - Children 16+
 - Parents
 - Grandparents

All sessions of 3 hours duration.

Interviews were conducted in Hertfordshire, Leeds, Brighton, and Birmingham.

Quantitative Research

- 500 in-home face to face interviews (of which 400 with 16-44 year olds)
- National sample of adults aged 16+
- Quota controls on age, sex, working status, region
- Upweight of younger groups to align with study objectives
- Fieldwork conducted in late October 2001