

CITIZENS' INITIATIVE AND REFERENDUM



*towards*

**DEMOCRACY IN OUR TIME**

**The campaign for direct democracy in Great Britain and Northern Ireland**

**ASSESSMENT AND PLAN 2006**

**The campaign for direct democracy**

**Power Inquiry into governance in Britain backs DD**

**Ways to progress**

CITIZENS' INITIATIVE AND REFERENDUM I&R  
campaign for direct democracy in Britain



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**SUMMARY**

We as supporters of citizens' direct democracy (DD) in Britain see these early years of the 21st century as a time of both opportunity and severe challenge. On the one hand, representative governance is in crisis and constitution in chaos. On the other hand that viable remedy for their ills, citizens' DD, is little known, although oft maligned and even censored.

Established politicians and commentators have expressed their growing concern that the public, especially youth, have low trust in politicians and in the indirect, representative system of governance. The PoWER Inquiry, Rowntree Trusts' project 2004-6, confirmed this through their own research and experience, stating 'that the level of alienation felt towards politicians, the main political parties and the key institutions of the political system is extremely high'. They propose '...even given the supposed endorsement an election provides for a party's broad programme' that ways should be found to better involve the electorate in policy development and governance in the period between elections (see Recommendation 23). The PoWER Inquiry makes numerous recommendations for reform of government, parliament and mass media, and has found a large (perhaps short-lived) public and 'establishment' audience for these ideas.

One of PoWER's recommendations is for citizens' initiative and referendum (I and R) at all levels of governance.

Most politicians oppose genuine direct democracy of this type.

DD, for instance citizens' I and R as practised in several countries of Europe, is little known in Britain. However, if people are presented with the idea of direct democracy in surveys then a very large majority supports it. There is hostility to DD in the mass media as well as in politics so the principle and examples of DD have been censored and thus kept out of the public's sight and mind. These factors as well as low public and elite knowledge of these well tested and

effective democratic methods have hindered the emergence of a strong movement for “more” democracy in Britain. Existing political reform groups have paid little or no attention to DD, Some “think tanks”, close to “establishment” are actively opposed to such reforms.

We argue that existing pro-DD campaign efforts should be stepped up for instance by giving human and financial support to groups such as I&R of [www.iniref.org](http://www.iniref.org). In addition, many citizens across the land must be persuaded to become competent and committed to argue the case for this reform and to diffuse the ideas, as “multipliers”, and catalysts of local DD reform-action groups.

In the paper “ASSESSMENT AND PLAN 2006” we appraise the prospects for I and R in Britain, venturing that there is currently a moment of opportunity to promote our aims. We stress the importance of background work and study and having discussed why there has been so little activity to promote DD we illustrate that increased support of the campaign for more, direct democracy is vital now. In the section “Ways to Progress” we list major aims and some components of planned work. To promote campaign growth we must locate, encourage, support active reformer democrats; seek further partners for our core group; build our membership organisation; develop co-operative links to other organisations, campaigns and think-tanks; enable trans-national exchange and mutual support for direct democracy e.g. GB/CH/FRG/I; and seek professional advice to help clarify legal aspects related to expansion of campaign and institute. Plans for education and campaign outreach include maintenance and development of web site; improving our public presentation of the campaign; managing and updating our mailing list; regularising the I&R newsletter; expanding the democracy discourse which we have promoted for ten years on- and off-line; consolidating our documentation and analyses of DD.

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### **The prospects for I and R in Britain: contextual developments**

In recent years the political establishment of Britain has become concerned about falling public interest in formal politics, more so by falling turnout in local and countrywide elections. This concern has stimulated official and non-governmental investigations of public attitudes and political behaviour. One of these investigations, completed earlier this year, funded by Rowntree Trusts (foundations) was carried out by a commission drawn from people of mixed backgrounds assisted by a research group. During its two years of work which involved social surveys, interviews of “ordinary” citizens, experts and politicians plus public meetings held across the countries the “PoWER Inquiry” (cost: nearly £1m. BPS) attracted considerable mass media attention.. During 2005 our I&R Campaign was invited to submit (unpaid) written evidence about direct democracy, which we did. Our web site [INIREF.ORG](http://INIREF.ORG) was described and “linked” at the PoWER web site. Our founder was interviewed by one of PoWER’s researchers, much of the interview transcript (beware minor

transcription errors!) is reproduced at PoWER's web site, allowing the case for more direct democracy to be presented at some length on-line. (See reference below: Power Inquiry: Evidence submitted on the executive and parliament.)

Prominent politicians seem anxious to respond publicly to the recommendations and findings of the PoWER Inquiry, as shown by the appearance of the finance minister and probable future labour party leader, Brown, at the launching ceremony of PoWER's report (March 2006) and the major speeches made by the leaders of the two main opposition parties, the conservatives (Cameron) and the liberal democrats (Campbell), at the PoWER conference held in London on May 6<sup>th</sup>. (Although these two endorsed some of PoWER's numerous reform ideas, in their speeches and replies to questions neither Campbell nor Cameron expressed any support whatsoever for Recommendation 24, citizens' initiative and referendum.) A copy of "Power to the People", the PoWER Inquiry's report, may be loaded down from their web site (below). The report printed as a book may be purchased there too.

The Power Report's authors draw attention to deficits of our democracy and in the way we run the country – compare our much earlier report on prospects for reform of democracy in Britain (Wallace-Macpherson a).

PoWER's recommendations include; improving responsiveness of government to the needs of the people; giving more clout to parliament for vetting and checking the executive and, a stated precondition for the success of these and other suggested reforms; increasing involvement of the electorate, beyond voting in elections, in public decision making and political issues. An important contribution to the latter, according to PoWER, could be the increased use of elements of direct democracy such as citizens' law proposal (initiative) and referendum, their Recommendation 24. See our response and critique of the PoWER report (Wallace-Macpherson b) and also an up to date consideration of the legal and constitutional basis for direct democracy in Britain as provided by Patel (reference below), both papers available on-line at our web site.

Citizens' initiative and citizen-triggered referendum, and related methods of democracy, have been promoted by us "I&R, a campaign for direct democracy in Britain" since the mid 1990s. For detailed description of well tried methods of direct democracy in countries similar to ours, see our published paper "Direct democracy in five countries of Europe", Erne et al. The I&R campaign is quite well known and widely cited, especially "on-line" ([www.iniref.org](http://www.iniref.org)) but the strived for large-scale public movement demanding "more" (direct) democracy has not yet begun.

Regarding the PoWER Inquiry: The report of yet another commission remains a report. Although "Power to the People" contains recommendations, their publication alone will not make them happen. On the other hand, all the publicity created by PoWER for more than a

year has pushed “reform of governance”, with “elements of direct democracy” included, to a higher place on the public agenda.

***We reformers should grasp this moment of opportunity  
to improve and amplify our campaign***

Social and constitutional change, and reform of democratic systems will not occur without a strong public will. To be effective while remaining civil and non-violent the required pressure from the citizenry, across the British isles, can grow from knowledge of essential facts combined with competence in argument, through persuasion of fellows and campaigning for reform.

To assist the development of such a civil movement, both advocacy and education, aided by study and research, are urgently needed.

Several programmes and campaigns will be needed, some which already exist could be expanded to include elements of direct democracy, for instance those which address electoral systems (single transferable vote, party-proportional representation etc.), and those lobbying for a British constitution. Co-operation with other campaigning organisations such as single issue referendum groups, pro-environmental campaigns and “think tanks”, which we have begun, should be increased.

I&R, a “campaign for direct democracy in Britain” has promoted citizens' initiative and citizen-triggered referendum and related methods of democracy over the last decade. We encourage people to join the campaign and become active. We need substantial financial support. Why? See the case for more democracy at our web site [www.iniref.org](http://www.iniref.org) and consider the value, potential resulting benefits and the expected costs to be incurred by the outlined strategies, plans and proposals (“Ways to progress”) referred to below.

**Importance of background work and study**

In our independent academic programme Integral Studies we are keen to develop “back-room” work – documentation, study, analysis and research – concerning direct-democratic methods and practice. We propose a data bank (possible co-operation with IRI-Europe) to show how citizens' initiative and referendum operate in at least several countries of Europe, from local to regional to country levels, so that the “state of the art” may be identified for Britain. A dossier arising from our 2004 conference (at the London School of Economics) has been accepted by a peer-reviewed journal for publication, so we have a basis of knowledge on which to build (Erne et al).

## Observations and analysis

### THREE KEY OBSERVATIONS

- Widespread public support for the principles of direct democracy, consistent over many years, can be shown in surveys and interviews.
- Most people, including those with higher education, have little detailed knowledge about direct democracy for instance how citizens' initiative and referendum work in practice.
- The mass media and other sectors have largely ignored those parts of the widely publicised "Power to the People" report which endorse direct democracy. (Other proposals such as lowering the voting age, reforming the second chamber of parliament and changing the way of electing MPs have been highlighted).

(Below we will expand on these observations, see "To fill in some detail")

### Why is a campaign for more, direct democracy needed?

We cannot leave the job of campaigning for democracy reform to existing groups. Some claim to support DD but have much broader agendas and so cannot be expected to do very much for DD – these include Charter88, New Politics and New Economics. The Electoral Reform Society may be neutral on DD. The Hansard Society and Institute for Public Policy Research IPPR appear antagonistic to DD, the latter group having newly published a pamphlet, albeit crude and self-contradictory, written by an MP supporter of the "prime minister in waiting" Brown, in which old prejudices against citizens' democracy are mobilised.

The PoWer Inquiry was a "one-off" project and will soon cease to exist, although a campaign group with several reform aims may be founded by some of the people who were involved. We cannot be sure that they will include DD as a priority theme, on the contrary this seems unlikely.

***Thus we must expand our focussed campaign  
for citizens' initiative and referendum***

### To fill in some detail

We have elsewhere (Wallace-Macpherson M. (b)) summarised evidence that for at least ten years a large majority of the public in Britain supports the idea of direct democracy if



confronted with it. This evidence comes from surveys by the reputable polling organisation MORI, and from a recent survey plus interviews carried out for the PoWER Inquiry.

### **A Big Question: Why is there so little activity to promote DD ?**

Given the widespread public support for the principles of DD, why is there so little activity to promote these powerful “tools” of participation and democracy? Some reasons appear to be:

- Public knowledge about DD, for instance I and R, is vague or non-existent. This applies to the higher-educated, to politicians and even to university academics of politics.

- Hostility to DD for instance to referendum in general, is widespread among elite groups such as controllers of mass media and newspaper editors. Recent confirmation of this hostility comes from the PoWER Inquiry’s talks with politicians and from the IPPR pamphlet referred to above. Even when reports or features about referenda (mainly in other countries) are published or broadcast in Britain, they are commonly predicated by negative remarks. Sometimes the idea that the electorate should decide on some aspect of public affairs is ridiculed. The mass media show negative prejudice towards and ignorance about DD; articles and even reader’s letters containing proposals to reform democracy by introducing elements of DD are usually rejected by editors. Another example of this censorship is shown by the selective omission of press and mass media coverage for the DD proposals of the PoWER report. Why this aversion to citizens’ democracy? Briefly, most politicians and those in privileged “mass media” jobs tend to expect negative results for their prestige and power, were DD to be strengthened. There remains a “closed shop” recruitment into the higher echelons of journalism, civil service and politics and an interlaced network of all. (Recent research has confirmed that a few private schools continue to supply most occupants of the “best” jobs and that in Britain the so called meritocracy is corrupted by privileged birth.)

- Obfuscation and desired confusion in matters of constitution

“Reform” of public life and its institutions is presented confusingly by politicians and mass media. Matters of constitution, swathed in centuries of “tradition”, carried through history by “fooling the people”, operated to this day by good old british “muddling through” are difficult for most citizens and “experts” to grasp, because they (matters of constitution) suffer from a chronic malaise of unclarity and obsolescence. Thus there is some justification for the observed public confusion. So much is wrong with our systems of governance that many must feel overwhelmed. Politicians are able to exploit the unclarity on the one hand in order to ignore justified calls for change; and on the other hand to get away with enacting arbitrary or simply bad laws and decrees in an undemocratic fashion.

Responding to our constitutional chaos and flawed democracy the PoWER report puts forward some 20 urgent proposals for reform of government, parliament and public life, plus a few about citizen politics and participation. One of the latter is about citizens’ initiative and referendum.

## **Conclusions and implications**

We have shown that low public and elite knowledge about direct democracy, hostility to the prospect of genuine citizen empowerment by its effective tools plus confusion about how our governance works all hinder the emergence of a stronger movement for “more” democracy in Britain. Campaigners must recognise these problems and respond to them.

On the bright side, a “moment” of opportunity for supporters of direct democracy has arrived, brought by the recognition of public contempt for formal “representative” politics, aided by debate around the report “Power to the People” of the PoWEr Inquiry. Politicians aspiring to high office and re-election are clamouring to offer reforms of constitution and democracy. Our campaign must acquire the resources to scrutinise their promises and give them “marks” for democratic quality. Also we should exploit the publicity given to “democratic reforms” which results from statements and “spin” of the political parties jousting in rivalry.

Existing groups and organisations can NOT be expected to give sufficient priority to promoting DD.

Thus the existing, dedicated (specialised) campaign I&R ([iniref.org](http://iniref.org)) must be nurtured, funded and further developed.

### **What are the priorities for such a venture?**

**In the following section “Ways to Progress” we will list some plans, proposals and ideas. Those who wish to work with us are encouraged to get in touch, to discuss concepts, ways and means.**

## Ways to Progress

### **The campaign for direct democracy in Great Britain and Northern Ireland** A list of major aims and some components of planned work

- 1) Growth
- 2) Education and campaign outreach

#### GROWTH

Locate, encourage, support active reformer democrats  
 Build own membership organisation  
 Seek partners for core group  
 Develop co-operative links to organisations, campaigns, think-tanks  
 Promote trans-national exchange and mutual aid eg GB/CH/FRG/I  
 Offer and canvass for consultancy work  
 Clarify legal aspects of campaign and institute

#### EDUCATION and CAMPAIGN OUTREACH

#### **Web site maintenance and development, materials for and presentation of the campaign**

- on-line postable membership application, payment and donation
- citizens' referendum proposal for "Right to I and R" (on-line signature collection)
- presentation of background to DD, case for DD in GB, how to achieve DD, need for campaign as sequential "tour" of web pages
- consider professional re-styling of web site

#### **Mailing list management and updating**

**Newsletter** Facts and news about DD in Britain, Europe and elsewhere

**Discourse** (person to person, e-fora, Usenet newsgroups, comment boards of on-line newspapers etc., blogs ....)

#### **Further campaigning and educational methods**

- Democracy Schools and courses for multipliers, activists (and the potential) held in GB and abroad (see Note below)
- Conferences, seminars, workshops
- Documentation and library
- Curriculum development
- Reporting and studying DD

### **Documentation and analysis of DD**

- exploiting rich sources from especially CH, FRG (need for translation)
- written guides tailored for polities e.g. towns, cities, countries.
- films, DVDs about direct democracy in action, taking examples from several countries

### **Note: Democracy Schools and Courses proposed INTERMEDIATE 4-5 days**

History of DD

Constitutional aspects

Basic principles

- initiative direct and indirect
- plebiscite and referendum
- town and region meeting
- recall of elected officials

DD systems in operation – selection e.g. CH, FRG, USA ± Poland etc.  
Regulations and conditions, role of administration and parliaments,  
concept of optimal democracy

Case studies – village, town/district, region/Land/canton, country

Academic study and research of DD – overview, recent advances

### **INTRODUCTORY 1-2 days**

Similar to “Intermediate” but in condensed form, with less time for questions and discussion.

### **SPECIALIST COURSES** for example

#### **Campaigning to win** 2 days

Presenting the case, winning the argument – Formulation of texts, rhetorics, responding to concern, fear and criticism. Campaigning tactics, reaching out to broad public, dealing and working with politicians

**Direct democracy in practice** Curricula and programmes to be developed

*For example: Comparative studies, detailed analyses, finding ways to build and improve public information services. For campaigners, practitioners and theorists. A continuing forum and college of democracy.*

Local

Regional

Country

Supranational

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