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Engagement and Participation: What the Public Want and How our Politicians Need to Respond

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ABSTRACT

Following the parliamentary expenses scandal, an array of parliamentary and constitutional reforms has been proposed as a means to re-establish public trust and confidence in MPs and Parliament. Populist measures designed to enhance public engagement and participation through more direct and participatory decision-making mechanisms have particularly gained traction in this debate. But many of these proposals fail to take account of what the public really wants in terms of engagement and participation. A more nuanced policy approach, which takes account of the complexity of public views, is required. Utilising the Hansard Society's annual *Audit of Political Engagement* this article analyses these complexities and suggests that two reforms in particular—enhanced political literacy education and a new House of Commons Petitions (Public Engagement) Committee—would make a difference in developing and sustaining public engagement and participation in the long-term.

SEEKING TO dissipate public wrath amidst the wreckage of the expenses scandal, regain control of the daily news cycle and out-do each other's reformist credentials, the party leaders have attempted to cleanse the Augean parliamentary stables by suggesting a wide range of political, constitutional and parliamentary reforms. Following a hasty examination of the pathology of the scandal, many politicians and commentators alike concluded that a link could be drawn between the visible affliction of the expenses debacle and the deep-rooted political infirmities that manifested themselves in other areas of our democracy. Far-reaching systemic reform was, they concluded, necessary.

The resulting smorgasbord of reform options proffered by the party leaders did at least indicate that they understand the Herculean nature of the task they now face if they are to regain public trust and confidence and re-establish the democratic 'chain of command' between the elected and electors.[1] But the inchoate range of options—everything from a House of Commons business committee and select committee reform, to a bill of rights and a written constitution, from electoral

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reform and an elected second chamber, to reduction in the voting age and a smaller House of Commons—few of which actually address the central problem of MPs' expenses, did little to reinforce the credibility of Parliament as a forum for deliberative rather than reactive democracy. Indeed, in prescribing such a wide variety of reform remedies—many of which will simply not be realised, at least in the short and medium term, due to a lack of policy consensus, political capital and legislative time—the party leaders risk making the cure worse than the disease: having promised so much, only to deliver so little there is a risk of alienating some members of the public still further.

Many of the proposed parliamentary and constitutional reforms have much to recommend them in their own right and some may come to fruition in time. But as the gap between rhetoric and reality becomes ever clearer in the run-up to the next election, there may be a strong temptation among the political class to focus not on the complexities of parliamentary and constitutional reform but on the populist political reform measures designed to enhance public engagement and participation through more direct and participatory decision-making mechanisms such as citizens' ballot and referenda initiatives, citizens' forums and panels, MP recall petitions and open primary contests to select parliamentary candidates.

Some value public participation in its own right as a form of enriched citizenship and accountability, others because of the legitimacy it confers on decision-making, the improved representativeness of decisions it secures or the more efficacious policy outcomes that can result. But whatever the rationale, it is now generally accepted in party political circles that it is necessary to provide a range of mechanisms to enable the public to have a greater voice in the political and policy-making process outside of the normal election cycle and that establishing new and more robust means for the public to hold MPs to account will be a vital tool in the battle to restore public trust and confidence.

Given this re-emergence of support for new measures of direct, participatory decision-making in the wake of the expenses scandal, it is worth examining whether this is actually what the public wants. For there is a danger that if the scope and scale of what the public wants is misread, any new mechanisms will in fact come to be dominated by damaging groundswells of impassioned faction or organised economic interest groups. Mechanisms that can readily be dominated by those that shout the loudest or have the most money at their disposal will be a regressive step that will do nothing to foster the breadth, depth and quality of public engagement in politics that we ought to aspire to.

It is this issue—what do the public want from, and what are they prepared to give to, the political engagement and participation process—that is the focus of this article. Utilising Hansard Society research into public engagement and participation over the last decade, particularly our annual *Audit of Political Engagement*, it explores the complexities of public attitudes to engagement and participation and

what implications these have for the development of new mechanisms of engagement and participation in the future. Bearing in mind these complexities, it concludes by outlining several example measures that Parliament and the Government could usefully adopt in order to ensure that future public engagement and participation is meaningful and sustainable, that it has breadth as well as depth, and prioritises quality equally as much as quantity.

Public perception of MPs and the impact on public engagement and participation

Historically politicians have rarely been held in high regard. The public outcry at the expenses scandal of 2009 represents merely the latest impassioned chapter in public dissatisfaction with politicians and the political system, not the emergence of a new narrative. Last year—well before the expenses scandal became public knowledge—Hansard Society research found that only 19% of the public thought Parliament was 'working for them'.[2] In similar vein, the 2007 *Eurobarometer* survey of public attitudes found that only 34% of the UK public trusted Parliament,[3] and the Committee on Standards in Public Life has consistently found in its biennial *Trust in Public Life* surveys that politicians are among the least trusted of professions when it comes to telling the truth.[4] Qualitative focus group research conducted by the Hansard Society in 2005 found that politics was viewed by the public as 'the pursuit of an exclusive and disreputable elite of 'hypocrites and liars''.[5] MPs were thought to be 'solely in politics to make money or advance themselves socially at the expense of others rather than to represent their constituents or the country's interest'.[6] Parliament was deemed to embody the traits of sly, greedy and deceitful creatures such as rats, weasels, snakes, foxes and vultures.[7] Public trust and confidence in MPs and Parliament has thus long been at a low ebb. The *Daily Telegraph's* revelations merely crystallised and magnified the problem through a daily drip feed of evocative tales of duckhouses, moats and non-existent mortgages.

Amidst this political ferment it is hardly surprising that almost any alternative to decision-making by MPs is therefore regarded as an attractive option. But there is no evidence before or since the expenses scandal broke that a huge swathe of the public have been newly politicised and stand ready and waiting to get involved in the political process in their stead. Rather, what Hibbing and Thiess-Morse termed 'stealth democracy' in America may have some resonance here. They found that the American public generally wanted only 'to make democracy visible and accountable on those rare occasions when they *are* motivated to be involved' and the one thing guaranteed to motivate them to action above all else was the belief that decision-makers were 'feathering their nests' by accruing benefits at the expense of non-decision-makers solely by virtue of their position.[8]

So too, here in the UK, although sustained public anger has been directed at parliamentarians because of the abuse of expenses, this largely extends to a desire to politically tar and feather the sinners. There is little evidence that it has translated into a more positive desire on the part of the public to directly involve themselves in the political process.

In the absence of any widespread public desire for involvement and participation then, there is a real danger that in grasping for alternative participatory decision-making structures, measures may be adopted that appear at face value to be sensible reforms but will in fact result in unforeseen, unanticipated and damaging consequences.

Engagement and participation: the public view

Hansard Society research over the last six years—through our annual *Audit of Political Engagement*—has consistently found that the public view of political engagement and participation is far more complex than many of those advocating for more direct, participatory forms of decision-making are willing to acknowledge.

In particular, the *Audit* finds that: 55% simply do not want to be involved in national decision-making;[9] a lack of time is the greatest barrier to participation;[10] a clear distinction is drawn between having a say and being involved in decision-making, and influence is favoured but not involvement;[11] people feel they lack influence in decision-making above all because 'nobody listens to what I have to say';[12] the more efficacious any form of political action or engagement is perceived to be, the more highly it is valued;[13] and although the public recognise what it takes to be a good citizen they largely fail to convert good intentions into positive action.[14]

Providing new mechanisms for participation and decision-making do not on their own provide a solution to these challenges, for when people have the opportunity to participate they do not necessarily take it, underscoring the good intention versus positive action dilemma highlighted in the *Audit*. Turnout in the devolved legislature elections and the Greater London Assembly and London Mayoral elections have, like recent general elections, been disappointing. One of the foremost explanations for this is that rather than heralding a new style of politics these institutions represent only a minimal break from the traditions of Westminster-style adversarialism.

But even when new forms of participation and decision-making are provided, the levels of turnout do not break the mould either. Much has been made, for example, of the Totnes primary campaign to elect the Conservative parliamentary candidate earlier this year. A significant and expensive innovation in the party selection process, the result was widely heralded. And yet only 25% of the public—in what is relatively good Conservative territory—actually participated. Three quarters of the public were not interested at a time when participation in candidate

selection, so soon after the parliamentary expenses scandal, could be said to be as favourable as it is ever likely to be for such a process. Similarly, last year, only 53% of the electorate turned out in the Greater Manchester congestion charge referendum even though the issue combined the British public's love of cars with the threat of a new form of taxation. If electoral turnout of 59% in 2001 is deemed to herald a crisis of democratic legitimacy, these results do not suggest that these participative mechanisms hold the cure. The turnout levels do not indicate a zealous public chomping at the bit to get involved; but they do resonate with the *Audit* finding that the majority of the public do not want to be involved in national or local decision-making.

Citizenship: good intentions versus positive action

The truth is that people claim that they will participate but in reality do not do so. There is a significant gap between their theory of being a good, socially responsible citizen and the extent to which they are willing to put that theory into practice, particularly if it requires a commitment of even low levels of time and effort. For example, in the most recent *Audit* study, voting is seen as at least 'fairly important' by 87% of respondents in the context of being a good citizen and is regarded as the most effective means of participation. Yet only 53% of respondents said they will be certain to vote in the event of an immediate general election.[15]

In the same *Audit*, the two most popular forms of political activism are signing a petition (36% said they have done so in the last two to three years) and boycotting certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons (18% said they have done so) both requiring only minimal commitment and effort.[16] Similarly, when an earlier *Audit* survey asked the public what they would be willing to do in order to express their opinion on an issue that was important to them, 70% said they would be willing to sign a petition, but only 55% had actually done so. Forty-six per cent reported they would be willing to contact their MP but only 20% had done so; 43% would be willing to contact their councillor but only 24% had done so; 38% would be willing to write to a newspaper but only 16% had done so; and so on. Interestingly, of those areas of action with a response rate of over 10% willingness to do something, the smallest gap between willingness to do something and actual action was in relation to contributing money 'to an organisation campaigning on your side of the issue'.[17] This reinforces the view that the public are willing to entertain only limited, shallow, short-term forms of participation—such as donating money—which require little commitment even on issues they care about and are interested in. It suggests also that perceived self-interest can play a significant part in motivating people to participate and to narrow the gap between professed willingness to do something and actual action. The myriad number of participatory decision-making proposals thus far

suggested in the wake of the expenses scandal do little to address these challenges directly.

Efficacious action and positive outcomes

The *Audit* findings suggest that a belief in the efficacy of a form of action is one of the strongest drivers of political engagement. The higher the perceived efficacy of a form of action, the more likely it is to be perceived as an important component of good citizenship. For example, the data shows widespread agreement that voting is effective, far more so than contacting an elected politician, taking an active part in a campaign or signing a petition. Over two-thirds of the public think that voting is at least fairly effective in having an impact on how the country is run.

One of the critiques of the electoral system is that it privileges the votes of that minority of electors who live in marginal seats at the expense of the rest of the electorate, with the political parties pouring money, human resources and publicity into those few seats that will define the outcome of the general election, undermining the engagement and interest of the rest of the country. Yet, counter-intuitively, the *Audit* data suggests that voters in safe and marginal parliamentary constituencies display no significant difference in their perception of the effectiveness of voting. One might expect those respondents in marginal constituencies, where the parties are more likely to compete vigorously for their vote, to consider voting to be more effective. In fact, respondents in safe seats are more likely to think that voting is effective, albeit only by two percentage points. This might suggest that respondents' perceptions of the efficacy of voting are directly linked to the likelihood of their preferred candidate actually winning. Here too, then, there are warning signs for advocates of direct democracy: if the satisfaction of voters with forms of democratic engagement is directly linked to their desired outcome then many voters could rapidly become disenchanted with citizens' juries, referenda and the like if the outcome is consistently not to their liking.

Involvement and influence

One of the starkest *Audit* findings is that 50% of the public do not want to be involved in local decision-making and 55% do not want to be involved in national decision-making. In contrast to many of the other *Audit* engagement measures, there is little difference to be found between the genders and ethnic groups on this issue, reinforcing the robust strength of the response.

If half the population simply do not want to be involved in decision-making—not politics, but decision-making as defined in the broadest sense—then what solutions would direct democracy really offer to the decline in political engagement and participation? It is not at all clear that these approaches will work any better in the long-term in ameliorating the decline in engagement and participation than will the current

system with all its flaws if 50% of the public genuinely do not want to be involved.

Whereas representative parliamentary democracy is able to mediate between and balance competing interests within a 50/50 model of public engagement/non-engagement, it is likely that some forms of direct democracy, rather than increasing involvement, engagement and participation, will in fact merely entrench the views and attitudes of that 50% of the public who want to be involved to the detriment of the other half of the population who do not. Direct democracy measures, rather than empowering the widest cross-section of the public may instead merely provide for the repression of minority rights and interests by impassioned factions or economic interest groups.

The *Audit* data suggests that, rather than chasing after a utopian ideal of ongoing en masse involvement in the political process that is simply anathema to the public, a more effective way of improving involvement in the political process may be through addressing the stance of that 43% of respondents who feel they do not have any influence over decision-making but would nonetheless like to get involved. They are less than two-thirds of the 69% who agreed that they 'want to have a say in how the country is run' when that question was asked in the *Audit* survey in 2006.[18] The steadiness of the various indicators of engagement over the years suggests that this discrepancy is not the result of some startling change in opinions over a two-year period. A substantial number of people, a quarter or more of the public, seem to make a distinction between 'having a say' and 'being involved' in decision-making. They want influence over outcomes but not involvement in the process.

For these people, a lack of time is cited as the greatest barrier to involvement. This would suggest that either they have a particular view of how much time involvement in politics takes up and prefer not to give that kind of commitment, or that political involvement is in reality a low priority and they prefer to spend their time doing other things that they consider more important. Voting is seen by them as being for everyone but getting involved in 'politics' or 'decision-making' is not for 'people like me'. As previous *Audits* have noted, many people take a very narrow view of what politics is, and may not always make the connection between their most pressing interests and the seemingly remote or esoteric world of Westminster or town hall politics. The latest *Audit* findings suggest that many extend that disengagement from 'politics' to disengagement from involvement in the decision-making process even if it is not described as 'political'. This affords no succour to those advocating greater direct democracy.

Knowledge and interest

Hansard Society research has consistently found a direct link between levels of political engagement on the one hand and levels of knowledge

and interest on the other. People's perception of what 'politics' is remains narrow and their knowledge and understanding of the basic tenets of our system of parliamentary democracy is worryingly low. Around half of the public have never heard of, or know nothing at all about, the constitutional arrangements governing Britain.[19] Just 32% agree that they 'have a good understanding of the way Parliament works' and only one in two are confident that Parliament is not the same thing as government.[20] In the latest *Audit* survey 51% of respondents claimed to know not very much' or 'nothing at all' about politics.[21]

The public's perception of politics and politicians is as important as the reality in influencing their views about the democratic process and political engagement for good or ill. Prior to the expenses scandal the *Audit* data showed that public perceptions of MPs as a group are generally poor and yet a respondent's perception of their own particular local MP is better. Although only 30% of the public were satisfied that MPs were in general doing their job, 41% were satisfied that their own MP was doing so. Familiarity appears to breed favourability when a comparison is made between those who express satisfaction with their MP and those who can actually name their own MP. Fifty-nine per cent of those who named their MP correctly were satisfied with the job they were doing, compared to only one in four of those who did not know their MP's name.[22]

Public knowledge, interest and involvement in politics have historically been skewed in terms of gender, age, class and ethnicity and the *Audit* series data demonstrates that this remains the case. Men, older people, more affluent social classes and people from white ethnic backgrounds tend to be disproportionately politically engaged. Social class has more of an impact on political engagement levels than any other factor. On every single measure in the latest *Audit*, people classified as social grades AB are more politically engaged than DEs, frequently by a margin of 15–20 percentage points. Correspondingly university graduates are significantly more engaged than those with fewer or no qualifications, and readers of quality newspapers more so than readers of the popular press.[23]

Where do we go from here?

The barriers to public engagement and participation in the political process are thus broadly a mixture of a lack of knowledge and interest, low levels of satisfaction, and a shortage of time. If participation in the political process is to be enhanced, knowledge and interest need to be augmented and deep-rooted social and demographic disparities addressed. The objective must be an informed as well as an engaged public. Mechanisms for engagement and decision-making need to be constructed in such a way that they provide for a more satisfying engagement experience, respecting the fact that influence through

having a voice in the process rather than direct involvement is preferred by a majority. Such mechanisms must also be mindful of the time that the public is able and indeed willing to give to the political process—which is not the amount of time that many politicians, commentators, political scientists and the Hansard Society might wish they would give. Careful consideration of the role that self-interest plays in the public's thinking about whether to participate is also necessary to see how this might be utilised to encourage greater engagement. But overall the focus should be on the quality of public engagement and participation not just the quantity and scale of direct involvement in the process.

With this remit in mind, rather than many of the direct participatory mechanisms recently talked about, two particular reforms in particular could be usefully pursued. One requires a commitment to significantly reform and augment existing citizenship education policy with a focus on political literacy in order to tackle the knowledge and interest deficit that so bedevils public engagement. If done well it affords the prospect of long-term benefits in enhanced public participation and political accountability. The other requires process reform: changes to parliamentary procedure in order to give the public an immediate, direct and effective voice in Parliament through a new Petitions (or Public Engagement) Committee.

Expanding political literacy

First, knowledge, interest and understanding of politics can be addressed through improved citizenship education, or more precisely through improved political literacy education. There is, in some quarters, an appetite, and therefore an opportunity for this. For example, among some hard to reach communities and groups there is greater interest in politics generally than has perhaps previously been recognised. The latest *Audit* results display significant movement in the response of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) members of the public over the course of just 12 months. Since 2007 the proportion of BME respondents expressing an interest in politics has risen sharply by 15%, demonstrating a possible 'Obama effect' at work, at least temporarily, in British politics.[24] Younger people (aged 18–34) and women are more likely to want to know more about Parliament than other groups.[25] And among the 18–34 age group our research suggests that there is a real desire to know more about Parliament even among those who generally consider themselves uninterested.[26] The recent Youth Citizenship Commission also found that while 77% of young people feel it is important to vote and 70% see voting as a good way to influence national and local issues, only 27% know who they would vote for, underscoring the scope for greater information and education and the need for political parties to respond more positively and imaginatively to this challenge.[27]

The Hansard Society's Citizenship Education Programme has found that when political education is delivered well and when young people are offered opportunities to get involved in the political process they do so enthusiastically and find the experience rewarding. In the last evaluation of our pioneering HeadsUp project—an online forum which enables young people to debate with their peers and influence decision-makers—30% said they now felt more motivated to participate in elections, 90% said that on balance they were more likely to vote, and 50% said they were now more interested in political discussions.[28] These figures are important because, as the Youth Citizenship Commission found, if young people can be persuaded to participate in politics early on there is a greater chance that they will continue to be engaged throughout later life. The problem is that high-quality citizenship education is not the norm in the majority of schools and many remain ill-equipped to deliver engaging and interesting lessons, due in no small part to a shortage of specialist teachers.

But citizenship or political literacy education seems to have fallen off the agenda of the political parties. It has not been mentioned as part of the systemic reform solution to rebuild the democratic 'chain of command' between MPs and the public and it is unclear what any possible new incoming government may do in this policy sphere in the future.

A petitions (or public engagement) committee

The public's desire for influence rather than involvement, for giving voice to their views and being heard, points to the fact that the political process may be as important as the policy outcomes from any such process, though positive outcomes do reinforce the value that the public places on the process. But such processes have to be satisfying forms of public engagement if that engagement is to have any chance of being sustained. The most obvious form of enhanced democratic engagement in recent years has been the government's efforts to consult more widely on policy proposals and provide opportunities for the public and interested stakeholders to have a say. However, amidst the blizzard of consultation opportunities a perception has increasingly grown that too often the process is illusory and that the government has already made up its mind, resulting in disengagement amidst increasing cynicism.[29]

The challenge then is how to adopt new mechanisms to enable people to have a say and exercise influence in a meaningful manner, and in a way that ensures that politicians must listen and respond, but which recognises some core constraints: that not everyone's views can be reflected in the final outcome and the degree to which people actually want to sustain their engagement is quite limited. Here a Parliamentary Petitions Committee would provide a possible solution

and ought to at least be adopted on a trial basis by the House of Commons.

Petitions are an important part of the contemporary democratic process. The *Audit* shows that the public are more likely to sign a petition than they are to engage in any other form of democratic activity.[30] Petitions should therefore be made a much more significant feature of the work of Parliament in order to better engage the public and be more responsive to matters of topical public concern. At present, petitions are governed by strict rules about wording and there is little sense that petitions to Parliament result in any concrete action on the part of MPs. In contrast, the Scottish Parliament has a Public Petitions Committee which plays a pivotal role in connecting the public and the legislature. It assesses the merits of each petition, if necessary through the taking of evidence. It filters out petitions where action is already being taken or where the case is weak. But where there is a case to be answered it refers petitions for further consideration. A similar Petitions Committee could be established in the House of Commons to assess issues of public concern and, if appropriate, to make referrals for debate or committee inquiry. The introduction of a petitions system would have symbolic value in better linking Parliament and the public. But it cannot be a petitions system in any circumstance and at any price. To be truly effective such a system must become an integral and core part of the parliamentary process not a bolt-on accessory. Any petitions system, particularly involving e-petitions, needs to sit at the heart of a well-defined procedural process which is transparent and clear to the public.[31]

Although a Petitions Committee has been mentioned as one possible parliamentary reform by the political parties in recent months it is not a proposal that has hitherto gathered much momentum. It is certainly not a panacea for public engagement and participation but it does offer a realistic and deliverable reform that responds to and balances some of the public's demands and constraints with respect to engagement and participation. As such it has a better chance of success than many of the proposed reforms on the party leaders' smorgasbord.

Conclusion

Ultimately the public's views about political engagement and participation are complex, sometimes contradictory, and rarely uniform. Most are not that interested in engaging and participating in the political process, locally or nationally, and when they are motivated to do so they prefer options which demand little by way of sustained time and commitment. They want a voice in the process in order to exercise influence but do not necessarily expect or want a greater level of involvement. And yet, they feel they lack influence in decision-making if politicians do not listen to what they say and they most value those methods of engagement and participation that deliver their preferred

policy outcome. Altruistic views of politics and the policy process have a role but self-interest may be a more powerful motivating factor for many. They have a well-developed sense of what it takes to be a good citizen but they rarely meet the test themselves.

There are nevertheless some clear factors that currently act as a barrier to greater public engagement and participation which if addressed could help enhance and augment such engagement and participation in a sustainable way in the future: primarily a lack of knowledge and interest, low levels of satisfaction and a shortage of time. When considering new mechanisms for engagement and participation then, these barriers need to be at the forefront of our politician's thinking, as they are with our suggestions for improved political literacy education and a Petitions (Public Engagement) Committee.

There is too often a tendency among politicians and political commentators to promote mechanisms for engagement and participation that require a choice: between having a more informed public or a more engaged one but not necessarily both; between securing wider engagement or deeper engagement; between quality of engagement or quantity of engagement. But the *Audit* data suggests that mechanisms which do not address both sides of the engagement and participation debate will ultimately not succeed. To be meaningful and sustainable, political engagement and participation needs to be built on the foundations of a more informed public; to have breadth as well as depth; and to prioritise quality as much as quantity.

Too often the future of the political engagement and participation debate is also cast in polarised terms as an unpalatable choice between the current representative system or alternative forms of direct participatory decision-making. In reality, given the complex nature of their views on engagement and participation, most members of the public would likely prefer a combination of the two: reforms which retain the best of representative democratic decision-making but which meld and absorb in seamless fashion meaningful processes and procedures for more direct participation. In short, what we need is, as Stoker argues,

'mechanisms to complement revitalised representative institutions with new mechanisms that help individuals feel empowered in the political process but in a way that does not demand that they become professional activists. We need to create a politics for amateurs because that is all most of us want to be when it comes to politics. But we should become better amateurs with a better comprehension of the task in hand.'[32]

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28 HeadsUp is an online forum for under 18s to debate political issues with their peers up and down the country, and with influential decision-makers. It is a safe, student-oriented space where young people become more informed about political issues, improve their discussion skills and let adults with political influence know what they think. Debate topics are chosen by the young people and have included a range of subjects, such as; immigration, crime, the NHS, climate change and international aid. Feedback from decision-makers and the wide dissemination of young people's views after every forum, is a key and unique element of the HeadsUp project. For more information see www.headsup.org.uk
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