



Change

starts small

www.mindthegaplondon.co.uk

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‘Perhaps we need to become empowered, to discover how we can change things. We have let other people get on with running things for too long.’

Mind the Gap contributor

Mind the Gap, the independent, civic initiative and pressure group started in London in October 2003 as a conversation between friends about the state of the world, of politics, and of our streets. It was born out of the feeling that people together can achieve so much more, sharing their problems, exchanging their stories and coming together to produce shared solutions. Over the winter months at the end of 2003 and beginning of 2004 Mind the Gap held a series of volunteer discussion groups across the capital.

We wanted to experiment with a different sort of discussion; one which gave people the opportunity to tell their stories about the city, to discuss the things they loved and hated. We also wanted to ask them about how the capital could be improved, what they thought of politicians and whether or not they could be bothered to vote. We also asked ICM, our research partners, to do more work for us into different issues affecting the capital and the country. All this work produced rich insights into the way Londoners were thinking in the lead up to the London Mayoral elections in June 2004.

The overwhelming majority of people who took part in the Mind the Gap groups were frustrated and felt powerless to change the current state of politics. They simply didn't feel that politicians had their interests at heart and they felt that government – both central and local – was far removed from their issues and concerns.

We asked volunteers to draw pictures of what they thought their relationship with government was (some of the illustrations are used in this book) and the image that seemed to sum up the feelings of our time was when one person drew people being crushed by a huge, bloated, Monty Python like figure. For many people our current political arrangements and structures of government are crushing the life out of them, not giving them room to breath.

After Mind the Gap groups had finished meeting, the mayoral electoral campaign was underway. With time short Mind the Gap then went into campaigning mode. We lobbied each of the main Mayoral candidates giving them a picture of what Londoners had been discussing and appeared in the media talking about the work that we had been doing. We published an open letter to all the candidates highlighting the concerns of Mind the Gap volunteers and outlining some of ideas that the groups had discussed.

Mind the Gap then played, what many commentators have suggested, was a unique role in a UK election. We acted as a trusted third party, looking at things from an independent perspective, applying non partisan pressure on politicians and seeking views from people from the bottom up. Our 'missing millions' campaign, which focussed on the concerns of people who always vote in general elections but seldom if ever in local elections, generated a lot of interest from the candidates and the media and the wider London public. All the main candidates - Ken Livingstone, Steve Norris, and Simon Hughes - acknowledged that Mind the Gap had made a significant contribution to the campaign and had highlighted some very important issues for London and the country. The missing millions campaign was widely acknowledged as one of the factors which led to an increase in turnout in the London Mayoral elections as some people heeded the warning that not participating in the election would lead to a vacuum which could too easily be filled by extremist groups.

Yet this marginal increase in turnout did not obscure one of the central truths that Mind the Gap demonstrated; namely that the gap between politicians and government and the people is growing and that a new type of engagement is required. The rich and varied discussions which the Mind the Gap groups held, the frustrations and passions expressed in them and the solutions they suggested have provided the inspiration for this pamphlet. Though focussed on London the work of Mind the Gap also provides some interesting pointers to the challenge facing the country as a whole.

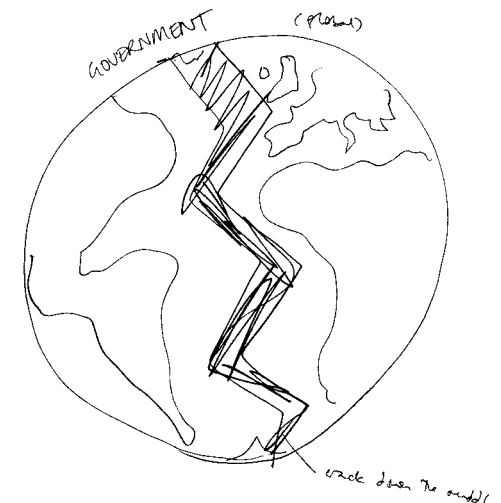
What is the problem?

British political parties are in crisis. Falling turnout, lack of respect for politicians, cynicism and mistrust of government, contempt for democratic institutions, a growing gap between elected officials and the public, a media that is driven by today's story rather than the presentation of facts, and a popular culture which encourages ambivalence and cynicism have all contributed.

The reasons for the current crisis are complex but the challenges of the crisis are stark. Our democracy is rotting from within, decaying as a result of an impoverished public debate about the issues the country faces, the outdated approach of the established political parties, the destructive relationship between politicians and the media and a lack of direction offered by our popular culture.

Politicians and political parties have grappled with these challenges but yet seem unable or unwilling to rise to them. The structure of the established political parties, forged as they were in the 19th and 20th centuries, no longer resonate with people. The modern Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democratic parties were all formed in response to the growth of a mass industrial society in the 19th and 20th centuries. Their structures, mass membership and supporters represented sectional interests and the ecology of politics was divided neatly into these competing interests. These parties are now exhausted and in decline.

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thing dot in space



A new politics?

It was a consistent theme in all the Mind the Gap groups and all the other research that we did in the lead up to the London elections that people were seeking a new type of politics. They want politicians to sound and look more like them, to be attuned to their concerns and their issues, to be less obsessed with who is up and who is down.

Voters: Crushed?



They want a politics which confronts the difficult issues with honesty and which works hard to deliver solutions to the practical problems people face day to day. This new politics, for the Mind the Gap groups, is a million miles away from the world of spin, scandal and stale party political debates. Citizens want to feel part of this new politics because politics means nothing without having people who care about the issues and want to do something about them. Mind the Gap contributors also recognised that they need to take some responsibility for making changes happen, by being more active in confronting politicians when they fall short of expectations or don't deliver. There was also a genuine recognition that we have to be prepared to accept that politicians are only human and cannot deliver perfection. There was a sense that somewhere in all this, the Mind the Gap groups were calling for a new contract between citizens, politicians and government to renew our political, civic and cultural life.

'It's like you're not heard, it's like your drowning'

From the discussions we held people seemed to be demanding that a new politics would have the following characteristics:

- It is not a professionalised politics
'We want a politician to be someone like us'
- Politics where mistakes are admitted and apologised for
'Admit it if something is not working, admit it, and say it's not working, it has been a disaster but I will try my best. Be honest about defeat or failure'
- It focuses on the passions of people as they live their lives not abstractions or issues of little or no importance to the majority of people
'Listen to the people. Take on board what they say and do something about it.'
- It is not confrontational but characterised by creative dialogue
'Really talk to people don't just wave at them as you walk past'
- It produces better solutions to the problems because more people are involved in the decisions, they have broad support and deep consensus

For too long we have accepted the current state of our politics with a cynical resignation. As a result politics has become more and more mired in stock notions and habits of how it should be, how it should operate. It was clear from the Mind the Gap groups that people are now recognising the need for change.

'We don't actually believe politicians anymore you know. There is no evidence that when they get into power, they carry things out.'

Mind the Gap contributor

A discontented citizenry?

Since WW2 politics in this country has been dominated by the two main political parties with other parties like the Liberals, SDP and Liberal Democrats playing significant but essentially marginal roles. The last fifty years has seen the gradual and now accelerating decline of these main political parties, with deep erosion in their organisation, membership and reach.

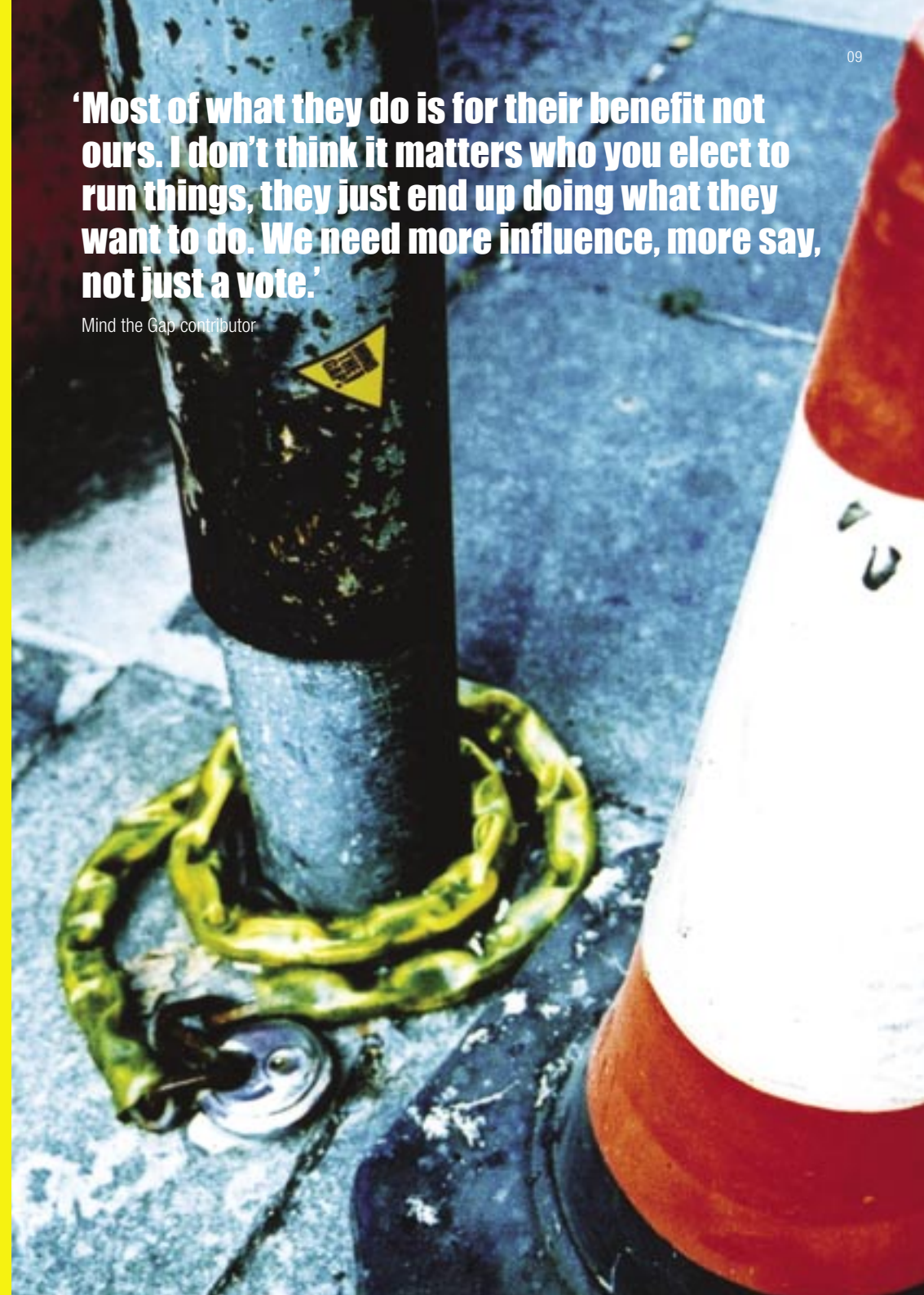
British politics has been dominated by the dynamic interaction between these parties and there has been no significant challenge to the hegemony of this system. The only attempt to 'break the mould' was made by the SDP which emerged in 1981 as the Labour Party began the process of coming to terms with its electoral defeat in 1979. The SDP offered a momentary glimpse of what a genuine political alternative might look like, but was unable to break through and subsequently morphed into what is now the Liberal Democrats.

This political system, therefore, has proved to be remarkably enduring. Remarkable because during the period between WW2 and today profound economic, social and cultural changes have swept through

the country and the world. In the face of these changes the main political parties have endured, plying the same kind of trade, offering the same kind of solutions, inhabiting the same position in our national life, and somehow avoiding the winds of change blowing all around. These political parties have now reached the point of exhaustion, incapable of responding to the challenges of the new century, still anchored to a backward looking view of what politics is for. In the Mind the Gap groups there are the murmurings of a discontented citizenry which is beginning to demand that the conditions in which we now live, the issues we face, and the aspirations we now have require a new type of politics, one that is closer to the grain of the lives we now live. A politics which isn't neatly divided into categories or pigeonholes but which looks at the world from the citizen's perspective.

'Most of what they do is for their benefit not ours. I don't think it matters who you elect to run things, they just end up doing what they want to do. We need more influence, more say, not just a vote.'

Mind the Gap contributor



We can't even talk about the things that matter

Our political culture is infantile. The words its uses, the way issues become impossibly polarised are symptomatic of an impoverished political culture. When dialogue is infantile it means that it becomes impossible to discuss things that really matter, to confront reality in all its complexity and difficulty.

without shouting at each other

'The politicians have control and keep power for themselves. We need politicians who look and sound like ordinary people; ordinary people faced with the same issues as us'

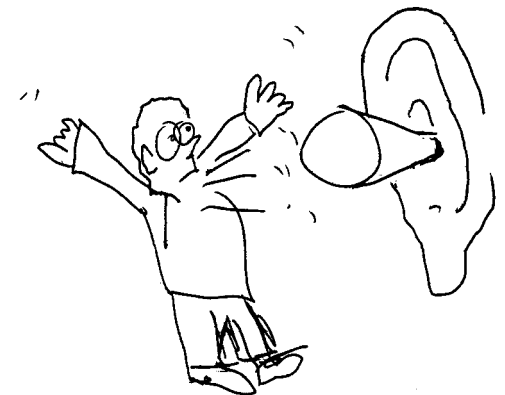
Mind the Gap contributor

The type of debates which say 'I'm right, you're wrong' do not lead to productive dialogue or creative solutions. It creates the conditions for a kind of 'political circus' which is characterised by strange men in suits hurling abuse at each other even though, again and again, we hear that people are completely switched off from this type of political exchange. So the way we conduct our politics, with the peculiar diction of its debates, is a spectacle that is played out as if in some empty theatre where the spectators have long ago walked out.

The reality is that we all look on with a kind of resigned bemusement. Yet while the political theatre empties out there doesn't seem anything valid to replace it and that poses a very dangerous threat to our democratic way of life. As one person put it:

'It is a terrible thing to say but I think that someone could come along to exploit all this. Someone with bad motives, like Hitler or something.'

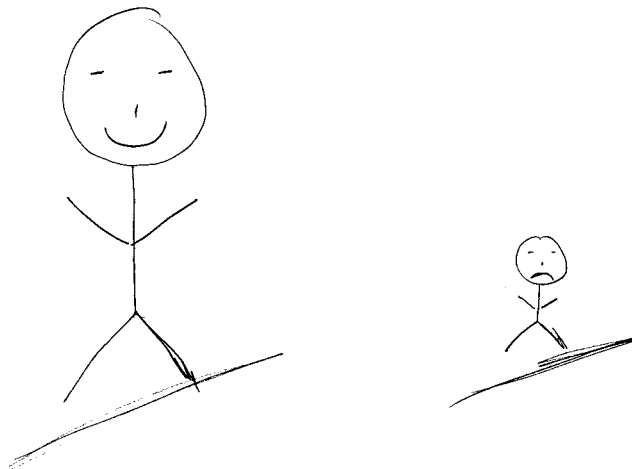
This person was recognising the inherent dangers in society where the gap between citizens and politician become ever wider; weak democratic institutions with a lack of popular legitimacy can easily create the conditions for extreme forms of politics to flourish.



Can you hear me?

A citizen -centric politics

The perhaps irreversible decline of the mainstream political parties means that people are beginning to demand new forms of political organisation which will both challenge the existing political parties and provide alternatives to them.



Contented citizens?

Commentators often talk about voter apathy but, in a sense, that provides the existing political elite with an excuse. What Mind the Gap demonstrated was that on the whole citizens are passionate about the issues that affect them – their jobs, their family and their local area. They may no longer see the political parties as the focus for solutions for their problems but they are not apathetic in the way that is traditionally thought.

They are very interested in solutions to their problems whether they are the delivery of good schools and hospitals for their local area or what the police are doing to solve issues of jobbery or anti-social behaviour in their neighbourhood. These are issues that affect them at a very deep level; they define the way in which the individual citizen perceives him or herself. They then search around for the institutions and structures which are there to help them and they don't get any response.

Local authorities are perceived as rigid, bureaucratic and unresponsive; political parties as remote, debating in a language which seems obscure, and presenting and dealing with issues in a way which doesn't seem to connect with them on any real or meaningful level. As one volunteer put it:

'In the past we have filled out these local authority surveys for different reasons. I haven't seen anything I have filled in ever come to light, you don't get any feedback that they have taken what you say on board.'

As part of its campaign in London Mind the Gap asked London's missing million voters – those who almost always vote in general elections but never in local elections – what they thought about a range of issues. The overwhelming majority said they felt there were fundamental problems with the way they were governed; a powerful sense came through that citizens did not know how to make change happen, how to find the levers for a real change in their local communities.

The reality is that the UK's missing voters are angry and frustrated and not voting or switching off completely is a kind of protest. They don't identify with any of the political alternatives presented to them. At a very deep level they don't trust the existing political parties and the media that reports on politics and there is no apparent alternative for them to turn to. Some 40% of UK voters fall into this 'missing' category and there is little sign there needs are being addressed. They could become a very important force in UK politics in the next ten years. They are not yet on the march but they are beginning to stir.

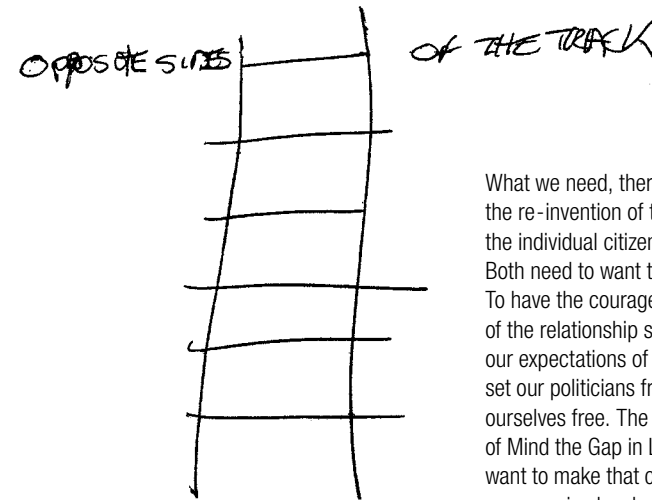
'The whole political process is crap. I don't think I'll bother to vote this time. I don't see the point. You vote every so often, but it doesn't mean a thing, they just carry on and do their own thing.'

So what needs to change?

Listening to Mind the Gap groups it became clear that part of the explanation for the disconnection between citizen and politician is that politicians no longer have the legitimacy or authority they once had.

The world of the House of Commons, the media that reports it, of party conferences and the whole lexicon of modern politics has become a self-serving world which feeds on itself, talks to itself, believes its own propaganda. The citizen feels alienated from this and seeks a richer language with which to engage. Politicians need to recognise that, at the moment, when they speak hardly anyone is listening.

The common idea that politicians never answer a question is a typical example of where our expectations of politicians are trapped. We don't expect them to speak the truth, we expect policy to be expressed in a way which seems technical and addressed to some identikit person rather than to us as individuals with dreams, fantasies and fears.



What we need, therefore, is nothing less than the re-invention of the relationship between the individual citizen and the persona of politics. Both need to want to make the change. To have the courage to redefine the terms of the relationship so that we as citizens change our expectations of politicians and we as citizens set our politicians free and by doing so set ourselves free. The evidence from the work of Mind the Gap in London is that citizens want to make that change but that politicians are perceived as holding them back.

A new culture of democratic engagement?

There has been much discussion in recent times about reviving local democracy. This has taken myriad forms and has been expressed in many different ways. Today it is fashionable to talk about the 'new localism'. A consensus has developed that reviving local democracy is critical to re-engaging and regenerating communities.

'I hate the bureaucratic nature of councils. You feel you are part of a system of automated letters. You are never treated as a human being. Councils just make assumptions about people and don't think about them as individuals'

Mind the Gap contributor

This is some ways true but the vision which is set out by those that advocate this new localism still sees existing political forms such as local authorities and so on as the key to the future. This is partly because this is the only local political form we currently have; however local government is seen by the vast majority of citizens as irrelevant, remote, self-serving and bureaucratic. The revival of local democracy, for the advocates of new localism, is about getting local authorities to work better and more effectively. However the Mind the Gap experience shows that what we need is a local democracy that is more imaginative and that offers citizens the things that they consistently say they don't have.

When Mind the Gap asked people in the lead up to the London elections in June 2004 what they really wanted from their Mayor, Assembly and local government the answer boiled down to two things: clarity and accountability. People wanted to know who was responsible for making the decisions. They wanted clarity on who, for example, made decisions about policing in their local communities, how many police will be deployed in their area, on what streets will they focus their efforts? Asking:

**'how will I know if the fight against crime is really working in my area?
Who can I phone up to find out?
Can I have a direct say on what resources should be deployed?'**

Again and again citizens, in different ways, asked for more transparency, for more involvement and for greater accountability. When Mind the Gap asked citizens who they thought was currently responsible for these things they assumed that, somewhere, in the tangled spaghetti of local bureaucracy, someone somewhere was fighting their corner though they didn't know where or how. As a result citizens felt powerless because they couldn't even change or influence change in those very areas which are closest to them- right at the heart of where they live.

The cynics argue that we get the local government we deserve or rather that the reason that local elections have low turnouts is because we as electors make rational choices about where to deploy our democratic effort. We decide that because local authorities have so little real influence and power that it is not worth our vote. We make the entirely rational decision to stay at home, getting on with our lives. The evidence gathered by Mind the Gap doesn't seem to bear this out at all. People don't vote in local elections because the forms that currently exist simply do not resonate with them. There is nothing deeply felt or intimate about them, nothing which connects with their lives on an emotional level. Their desire for clarity, accountability and involvement simply are not met in the current set up.

We feel most connected when the thing we are connected to has some real emotional tie. That is why close relationships with neighbours and a wider local community is the most effective way to reduce crime, improve the fabric of a community, and to improve the nature of civic life. It is almost as if the structures at the local level need to operate at this lowest level of molecular structure, to create small, integrated units that give people a sense of place, a sense of responsibility for place.

Mind the Gap's work in London demonstrated that change starts small. It starts in conversations between people who are really concerned about issues that affect them, their families, their friends and neighbours. In small groups of volunteers who want to make a difference to their local communities. Change starts small and we need to create structures to allow these small groups to make real change possible. Citizens want to feel that they have some control over their lives and over the services that are delivered to them.

It would not be realistic, though, to suggest that all citizens of this country are burning with the desire to sit on hospital trust boards and be school governors. There is what might be called a continuum of citizen's action which ranges from those citizens who just want things to work to others who want to drive change, to run things and have a real voice. So the challenge is to create different structures to cater for the needs of citizens across this spectrum.

As the Mind the Gap groups demonstrated people become most engaged when they feel, deep down, that an issue is important to them, that it impinges on the way they feel about themselves, where they live and what they believe in. As one young mother put it when talking about anti-social behaviour:

'You've got drunks sitting on benches all day. My children look at them and I'm afraid they'll turn nasty. The benches are for shoppers with their families when they want to have a snack, but the police do nothing. It's not good for my children to see all this.'

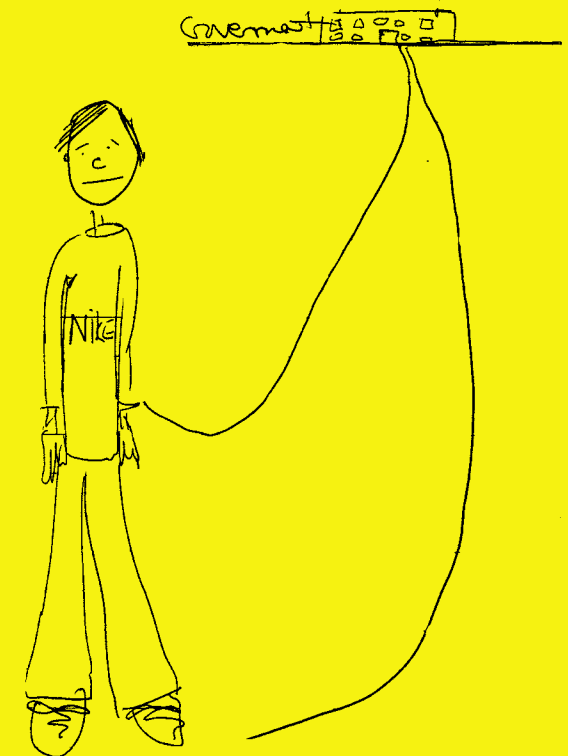
This quote illustrates why so many people in Britain are concerned about anti-social behaviour. These are things that have a direct affect on their perception of themselves and the society in which they live. As another mother put it:

'It's about the next generation not growing up thinking these drunks and drug takers are the norm.'

The evidence from Mind the Gap is that people are crying out for the opportunity to make a difference to their lives and the lives of their community but, as yet, they haven't found the means of expressing that desire. They want the opportunity to make decisions, to have say on issues which impact them. They are beginning to demand a local democracy which is about more than just electing politicians in local elections. They want more imaginative ways in which they can participate. They are open to, for example, the idea of directly electing police chiefs so that their vote really counts over an area of vital local concern. They want the police to police but they also want a say over how that policing happens. As one Mind the Gap Contributor put it:

'It's about local power in the hands of people. People should be able to determine what happens where and what is spent without bureaucratic restraint'

So we need to start the process of building a new culture of democratic engagement at a local level where we start to relate the exercise of democratic choice to real issues which affect people in their day to day lives – whether that is dealing with drunks, or dealing with schools. Where people are demanding it they should be given the opportunity to have a real choice over those issues which are of such central importance to their lives.



We need to create the conditions for a resurgence in our local democracy because this is one of the ways in which the corrosive centralisation of our system can be challenged. It is only at the local level that we can hope to revive the roots of a democratic culture which gives people real choice over the things that really affect them and real power to make a difference.

The discussions in Mind the Gap groups often came round to the view that citizens had to take more direct responsibility for making change happen; that we can no longer rely on politicians to deliver for us. Group members recognised that some of the most effective institutions are voluntary organisations, initiatives that have been taken by citizens to solve a particular problem. These organisations tend to be run by dynamic citizens who inject personal and collective energy to bringing new ideas to bear and making things happen.

The old centralised view of politics is that politicians can make decisions for us; that if we are good and pay our taxes then in the end government will do the right thing. The evidence is that on the whole people think that government does the wrong thing. So the new politics needs to pick up and embrace the diversity of activity which goes on in every community, the networks of voluntary action and charities, which can bring new energy and richness to problems that people grapple with everyday.

The Mind the Gap groups showed that people are cynical about the government's ability to do things and no longer trust the motives of politicians at all levels of government. People know that governments can stifle out initiative and voluntary action. In a world where citizens become more empowered it will be they who are set free to come up with solutions and make them work.

'You can join the local political parties but I feel that they are all corrupt, when you see in fighting and you look at the letters pages of the local newspaper you think you don't want to be part of all that. So all the things you could have done or said to get involved go by the wayside'

Mind the Gap contributor



The Challenge of Cultural Change

The discussions in the Mind the Gap groups were full of concerns about the culture in which we live. They recognise that there are many positive aspects of the modern world but a certain ambivalence emerged. The groups accepted and celebrated many aspects of modern life; computers, mobile phones, speed, the growth of satellite and cable T.V, the diversity of ethnic and social groups reflected, for example, in the number of different cuisines available in the capital.

'In some ways we all want to try to make our lives and the lives of others better. However, sometimes it feels that we are all here for personal survival, with so little time to look after others. It's a selfish culture which breeds a lack of respect for others.'

Mind the Gap contributor

The groups also revealed an ambivalence about celebrity culture and programmes like Big Brother and I'm a Celebrity. Many thought these sort of programmes were superficial and morally dangerous whilst others believed that they revealed something important about the growing gap between themselves and politicians. In a survey, for example, that Mind the Gap conducted among its volunteers, it was revealed that Bob Geldof would probably have done very well in the London Mayoral elections and that Jamie Oliver should have been his running mate! Celebrity culture, whatever one thinks about it, has a profound influence on people's thinking.

Many in the Mind the Gap groups were appalled at its influence but many others expressed the view that they trusted certain celebrities more and that their views had more credibility than most established politicians. For these people the unresolved question was why millions of people are routinely engaged in watching these programmes and exercising their votes in determining the outcome of these celebrity contests while they can't be bothered to vote in elections in which they are electing people who will be exercising real power over their lives?

Despite this positive view on certain aspects of the modern world in just about all Mind the Gap groups there was a desire for citizens to agree on some fundamental cultural and social values which we could all share. Whether that meant saying hello to each other more in the streets or showing more

respect for other people's personal space there was a sense that Mind the Gap volunteers were uneasy about the cultural and social consequences of popular entertainment and the materialist drive which is such a feature of modern life. As one volunteer from Wandsworth put it:

'We're all too concerned about ourselves. We brush past people in a hurry, are aggressive and competitive and use language that ruins other people's day. All sorts of people are swearing badly. We need to remember or be reminded that we are part of a community and that everything we do has an impact on others even in a faceless city. Be considerate and mindful. Remember to take things in turn. We all need to cut each other some slack. Hold back and bite your tongue. Watch out for the weaker ones – the children and the elderly.'

The discussion about culture revealed a real uneasiness among people and the debate was often the one that produced most passion. It was as if people through their discussions were recognising some difficult and unpleasant about the modern world. They were acknowledging the urgent need for a culture of civic renewal and were recognising the extent to which bonds of community, of mutual respect have become eroded in the rush to succeed in our dynamic, ever changing world. As one person put it:

'People don't give a damn for each other. People just don't care - I think we really ought to rebuild this sort of thing – this sense of community of looking out for others'

What Mind the Gap showed is that there is a pent up appetite for change. The group discussions revealed that people are beginning to believe that a new way is needed. As the gap between ordinary citizens and those they elect to govern seems to grow they are becoming increasingly frustrated by their powerlessness. As one group contributor put it:

'We need to find a new voice because at the moment we are speaking and no one seems to listen.'



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