
Examination of Witnesses (Questions 641-659)

THURSDAY 23 MAY 2002

JULIA MIDDLETON AND AMELIA SUSSMAN

Chairman

641. If I could call the Committee to order. We are delighted to have Julia Middleton with us, who is the Chief Executive of Common Purpose, and also Amelia Sussman, also from Common Purpose, to give evidence as part of our inquiry into public appointments and patronage, and we are particularly interested in the work that Common Purpose has been doing on this front, and we wanted to hear some more about it. Would you like to say a few words, to start with, just to get us going?

(Ms Middleton) Certainly. There are two of us. Julia, I run Common Purpose. Amelia, who runs the campaign that we launched a while ago, called 'Just Do Something', which is to get people into public appointments. I am also an independent assessor, on public appointments. Common Purpose, as you probably know, has had over the last ten years, about 12,000 people who have been through our programmes, so a lot of my perception of this issue comes from speaking with the many people who have been on our programmes round the country. I would summarise their impression as follows, that, firstly, they have no idea what public appointments are, what the scope or what the system is strikes them as deeply non-transparent, most of them think it is a fix, everybody thinks that if you are on something you then become on everything, once you are in you are on everything. Most people sit back and say, "It couldn't possibly be me, absolutely not; it couldn't possibly be me," and you can only get them round that when you say, "Well, if he can do it, you can do it." Most people on public appointments, it seems to me, seem to think that you wait to be approached; there is deep conviction that there is not much point in doing it anyhow, because nothing will ever change. And all those perceptions, to my mind, are heightened if you are a woman, if you are from a black and minority ethnic community, if you are disabled, if you are from anywhere other than the South East, and if you are under 30. I am not suggesting what I have just described is the truth, I am just suggesting, with a certain amount of conviction, that it is the perception, and that is almost as important. And, at a personal level, I spend a lot of time feeling that I am sort of in the middle of these extraordinary groups passing in the night, one minute someone is asking me if I know somebody who is something or other, and the next moment someone is asking me if they know an opportunity, something or other. And groups never seem quite to do anything other than pass in the night. The things that we are passionate about are, one, that the information needs to be more available about the full options and what they involve, and that is why we launched this site, called 'Just Do Something'. Secondly, from our point of view, we spend a lot of time trying to challenge

citizens to get out of this "Nothing will ever change mindset" to realise that it is perfectly legitimate to be in the public realm, but not to be elected, and really to try to say to people, "If you have a good board, you usually have a very effective organisation; so, therefore, you must do this, it is part of being a citizen." We try to encourage people to plan their careers as citizens and actually to work up to posts and work through things and learn things; and the other thing I think we feel very passionate about is the sheer sadness, that very, very few people under 30 are engaged at all. I met somebody the other day, trying to persuade them to go on the board of an FE college, and she said to me, "I'm 24," and I said, "Okay," and she said, "Well, I haven't got wisdom." Wisdom seems to be what makes us all feel better about getting old, I am not sure it adds a great deal of value. "I haven't got experience." "Yes, but you did grow up in this community, you understand this community and you have succeeded in this community, and the board of the FE college can't be full of people aged 24, but we badly need you on it." And that was a complete revelation to a 24 year old, who then said, "Yes, of course, I must apply." So this need, it seems to me, in terms of planning careers as citizens, is to get people in at an early age and to get them contributing their knowledge and learning more and working their way through the system; that is obviously particularly important if you believe diversity is important, which, of course, I do.

642. Fascinating. Thank you very much. Did you want to add anything to that?

(Ms Sussman) No. I think that encapsulates it.

643. Just to get a sense of what you are about, just in a rather sort of practical way. I represent an area, it is an ex-mining area, we have great difficulty in finding people to sit on public posts, and Health Service posts, notoriously, we cannot find them. Now, if you were to descend upon my constituency, what might you do to it?

(Ms Middleton) I would start by not descending, I would probably be invited; and, of course, please forgive me if it is rude, but I believe it is quite important, I, of course, would be going to talk to them, not as a politician but as a fellow citizen, and quietly to try to persuade them that this matters, and to overcome a lot of those points earlier. I was not brought up in this country, but I am always amazed by that humility and modesty and that sort of "It couldn't possibly be me," would try to tempt people out of that, not to bully them but to tempt them. I would tell them if you go to Just Do Something.Net that we do, there are endless stories of other people "like you" who have done this. So I think there is a whole tempting thing, and to give people a real sense that they can change things. As Amelia says, if you are a school governor, and you are a good school governor, that means the chances of it being an effective school are greatly heightened.

(Ms Sussman) I think you do not underestimate the learning curve involved, there is always going to be one, but that should not be big enough to put people off.

(Ms Middleton) I would also argue that there is this legitimacy stuff. I think that people have this perception that at one end there are politicians and that

at the other end there are citizens, and my passion is, of course, that in the middle there is an active civil society. But people have sort of gone to sleep on the active civil society and conned themselves into believing that there is no space, that you are not allowed to do anything unless you are elected, and that there is no point in being in this middle space because nothing will ever change. And all those perceptions, I think, need changing. There is this middle area called an active civil society, and you do not have to be party political to be in it, which, of course, party political does put a lot of people off, and that is a legitimate and important space to be in, as a citizen.

644. Everyone will sign up to all that. The bit I want to get to though, which is the bit that you are doing, you see, if we have people in here, as we do, who are trying to do things about all this, whether it is the Cabinet Office or whether it is the Commissioner for Public Appointments, after you, we are going to have Operation Black Vote, and so on, it is not as if we have not got people subscribing to the theory, but we seem to have great trouble with the practice. All these people are energetically, they would say, doing all this stuff, and they run road shows everywhere, and they are busily trying to bring people in, and yet we seem not to be cracking the problem. I want to know if you have got the answer to it?

(Ms Middleton) I have not got all the answers, I have got some thoughts. No doubt you are on this Committee because you believe in it. I do, certainly, and, as an independent appointer, have seen it, but also seen it round the country, there is an act of faith in the appointer that one has to get straight. There is first an act of faith, that opening this out to more people is not just going to be a hassle, and that the methods of doing it are not just a pain, that you do not just appoint people you know, and that there is an act of faith, that if you take the time to go further out, there are extraordinarily talented people out there, who may take a little longer to find, but they are very talented and can add a huge amount. We must encourage people who are making the appointment to look outside. I know, in theory, everything I have said, sure you would not have any problem with, but I do not see it put into practice as much as one would hope.

645. So, when you talked about perception, and you said you are not saying this is the truth, let me just ask you, do you think it is the truth, when you give that view of how the world seems?

(Ms Middleton) I think there are some good examples of things changing, but I see a huge amount of it not changing.

646. If you were put in charge of the Public Appointments Unit, how would life be different?

(Ms Middleton) I would never be put in charge of the Public Appointments Unit, because I believe that I can do more to encourage citizens and to make this an exciting democracy outside Government than inside, or outside Whitehall than inside. I think there is a limit to what you can achieve inside, and there are some good things that I think you could do more, but I think you also need, you know, this is a marriage and there is the other side, and what I want to do is to badger fellow citizens to wake up and realise that

they are not delivering on their side of the deal either.

(Ms Sussman) I think the role of the Commissioner is quite tricky, because she has got a very important regulator role, which is important, but, at the same time, it is quite hard for her to campaign towards more openness; because it is analogous to the Charity Commission, they are seen both as a regulator and a campaigning organisation.

647. Yes. I think what we are trying to tease out though is, knowing all that, what should she be doing, or what might she be doing?

(Ms Sussman) She should certainly be making sure that the processes are opened up as wide as possible. I saw, in some of the transcripts previously of this Committee, that occasionally Departments go through a process where a couple of names are chucked into the hat, from civil servants, who have been asked to produce a woman, or someone, from the BME communities, and that may be seen like a quick fix, but I think there are other, much more thorough, and actually come up better with the goods, in the end, if they pursue other avenues.

(Ms Middleton) For example, as a woman, frankly, I am bored with being asked to apply, because I know you are just trying to fill the short-list with more women. Even me, you have to give me some sense that there is a point, and I know there is an enormous number of women like me who are actually rather bored of having to fill these short-lists full of women. So I think there is an act of faith from both sides. I would like the systems to be more awake, but there are some applications of principle and there is a willingness amongst the appointers to take a little bit of time on this; whenever you want to make an appointment, it is usually because you have a vacancy, and if you have got a vacancy, and I do it at Common Purpose too, you really want to fill it. The pressure of really wanting to fill it means that sometimes you go for somebody who is within your circle, rather than outside it, and you do not take the time to go and find more people. And if you do that too many times then you undermine people's faith, and in my view, also, undermine an important piece of democracy.

Mr Lyons

648. If you do not want to be the Commissioner, what advice do you offer the Commissioner, in terms of appointments; do you ever do that formally?

(Ms Middleton) I think there have been times, as an independent appointer, where I have said, "Look, these are not the rules," and I have found it very difficult when, for example, then there is a waiver on the rules, which has occasionally happened to me. I think that sometimes one should set the rules and have a small period when everybody adapts to them, but from then on not waive them much. So I think that there are whole issues about real consistency and making sure that not just some Government Departments but that all Government Departments really begin to do what the system says they should do.

Chairman

649. You are not saying that the formidable Dame Rennie is a soft touch, are you?

(Ms Middleton) I am sure she is not a soft touch.

650. But if she is waiving the rules when she is leaned on by Departments?

(Ms Middleton) Dame Rennie is not a soft touch, but, equally, producing change in Westminster and Whitehall is no doubt an elegant piece of finesse that is very difficult to get right, and I am sure she has to use her judgement on occasions. What I am saying is that I think that we have now got to a stage where really we should not waiver on anything, we should say, "This is the system." I must say that I was outraged by the series of questions. Your last question, which I am desperate for you to ask me, so that I can answer it, is, can you occasionally have people who are so swanky that they should not be required to go through the normal process; to which my response would be, would you seriously give a public appointment to somebody who thought they were so swanky that they did not have to go through a normal process? Even that question, to me, strikes me as slightly extraordinary. And I have had it asked of me.

651. The question is put because, as you will well know, there is a strong body of opinion out there, amongst people who regard themselves as if not swanky but distinguished, who say, "It's bad enough doing these things in the public interest; if you ask us to jump umpteen hoops on the way, we will go and do something else"?

(Ms Sussman) I think it is worth taking that risk. I think the other thing is that overt terms of office are very important; there is a reluctance to plan in advance and to advertise appointments that may come up, not, say, within the next three months but over the next year, because it appears insulting to the people who have currently got the term of office. But, actually, terms of offices should be right up front and transparent to the holders.

Mr Lyons

652. If you know that the rules are being broken in some of these Departments, or whatever, what do you do about that?

(Ms Middleton) It is an interesting concept, answering that question, because I do not particularly want to make life miserable for a lot of different people, but it is also an interesting concept in Government, having any job title that has the word 'independent' first; it is very tricky to do it and you have to make a judgement occasionally, and then sometimes go with the flow, and then find some other way of making your point. And, indeed, I think I probably have; but it is a very tricky one.

653. So if there is wrong-doing, you do not think you have got a civic responsibility to raise that formally?

(Ms Middleton) You will have seen me for, what, how many minutes; the thought that I would not raise it is not—I definitely raised it and acted upon

it, but there is a limit to what I could act on.

654. You have done it formally in the past then, objected to the way it has been done, the appointments, you have objected to the way some appointments have been made?

(Ms Middleton) I have objected to the waiving of something and then dealing with something in another way, yes. And, yes, it is tricky; it is an elegant piece. The other one, I know we are throwing out a lot of ideas, but one of them that seems to me to be very interesting is this question of numbers of days, that there are some appointments, occasionally I would look at it quite tough and say, "Do you really mean two days a week for this appointment; do you really, really mean two days a week for this appointment?" Because two days a week inevitably means that you can really only go for somebody who, for some reason, is doing a portfolio life; and I would argue that sometimes you see people on two days a week, who, really, it is almost becoming an executive job, not a non-exec job, and there are a number of bodies where I see, where I certainly could not apply for it myself, because there is no way I could clear two days a week. I could probably clear one day a week, but certainly not two, and it will be 15 years before I could. And, perhaps, I do not know, but you may want me, or people like me, when I am 44, rather than 60.

Chairman

655. I wonder what point you are making there, because presumably some jobs are two days a week?

(Ms Middleton) There are, but there is a huge number of them, chairs, I quite agree. But some of the members of quite a lot of committees is a lot, I cannot remember, what is the Housing Corporation, I think it is six a days a month; and the inevitable consequence of that is that you can really only appoint somebody who has a portfolio life.

656. As opposed to a real life?

(Ms Middleton) That is not at all true, I did not say that. I mean, a portfolio life is very good, and sometimes people have them aged 22 and sometimes they have them aged 72, and within it there is a lot of scope. You might have it because you are the second income earner, or whatever it is; but it does mean that you are going for a certain group of the population, and you are excluding another larger group. I might ask if I were the Chief Executive of this organisation have they got enough distinction between the exec. and the non-exec.

Mr Trend

657. Can we go back quite a stage; why do you think we have trouble with an active civil society these days? As politicians, I suspect we all feel it, too, because, I know, 50 years ago, there were millions of people in the political parties, it was more like America and it was a respectable thing to do, to join a political party, but that is dying out, literally dying out. Lots of other

organisations, public, voluntary organisations, people would join because they felt it was important to make a contribution, and this has changed, and it has changed significantly in the last 25 years, and you are, commendably, trying to do something about this. But what is the reason that we are losing this sense of voluntary participation?

(Ms Middleton) If I answer slightly in the negative, first, not because people are more selfish, not because no-one cares, I suppose for those two, not for all those reasons that everybody tends to get excited about, I believe. I was talking to somebody the other day who was saying to me, "You know, young people aren't angry, the way we used to be angry;" and the answer is, young people are still angry but they are also frustrated and feel that there is nowhere to take that. That is one of the reasons, for example, I would like to see more young people in public appointments. I think that there is a sense of frustration, there is a sense of this middle ground not being respected. And we have had 12,000 people on our programmes and I spend most of my time going up and down the country, speaking to them and saying to them, "If that's the problem, do not make me a list of the 12 people, other than you, who should do something about it; do something yourself." At which point they sort of look blankly at you and say, "But, how? Why? By what right? I'm not elected, I can't do anything." And then you just have to make sure of cajoling and inspiring people and make them realise that they can actually change things. I think people want to be engaged, are, indeed, engaged, a great deal more engaged outside the South East, and some of our perceptions are based on the fact that we are in the South East too much of the time. People may want to get involved, but not necessarily through the party machine any longer.

658. I sometimes wonder if it is something to do with the fact that people are having the responsibility for an event or an organisation or process, is a much greater potential obligation to them that it used to be; it is a parallel feel, but people organising street parties for the Jubilee this year. And one of the reasons they are being put off is they are overawed by the public liability insurance, on a form which appears to make you sign up for every catastrophe you can imagine, apart from acts of God and nuclear war, and people are reluctant to put their name to what appears to be a document which implies huge responsibility. Whereas, I would almost wonder, and I will just float this to you, if, in the old model, people came forward more because there was a greater sort of collective responsibility, and now it is becoming more individual. And I wonder if that is a problem, because people do not necessarily want to feel that they have to take out £5 million of insurance every time they meet their friends in the street. We are a more regimented and bureaucratic, red-tape society, we discourage this actively, Government does?

(Ms Sussman) I think it may be that within the 'not for profit' sector, it is quite interesting, or the education sector, for example, people are wary of joining governing bodies until they are absolutely clear what the liability of the members is. But, in a way, I think, a lot of those issues have been addressed now and people's minds have been put at rest. In a way, it is similar to the liabilities, I think, of non-executive directors in the corporate

sector. Provided people are clear what their responsibilities are and go through a learning curve of realising, then I do not think that is a barrier.

659. Do you think it would encourage people if, and one of the people we have had before the Committee suggested that they should be coerced, in a sense, that there should be a form of sort of national service that, I suppose, as a schoolchild, you would have to do a certain number of hours, just like you have to do jury service, if that is the same sort of idea of civil society, I am not sure I agree with them, but I would be interested to know? And what about the question of remuneration, where more people would be paid to do this; and is that an important part of the contract, in the modern world?

(Ms Middleton) Forcing people, very much like the jury duty, I saw that somebody said that previously. My experience is that that is not a great way to get people to do things; you inspire them to do things rather than force them to do things.

(Ms Sussman) Our experience of 12,000 people who have gone through our programmes is that volunteering their time is not an issue, they are only too passionate and committed to do it.

(Ms Middleton) As long as they know it has an impact.

[Previous](#)

[Contents](#)

[Next](#)

[Commons](#)

[Parliament](#)

[Lords](#)

[Search](#)

[Enquiries](#)

[Index](#)