
Examination of Witnesses (Questions 660-679)

THURSDAY 23 MAY 2002

JULIA MIDDLETON AND AMELIA SUSSMAN

660. What about paying them?

(Ms Middleton) Paying them, I think, is a tricky one. If you go back to the issue of independent assessors, if your mortgage is reliant upon you doing something, inevitably, it has a consequence on how you do it, and I do not think anybody should kid themselves that that is not true. Having said that, for onerous undertakings, when there is a lot of days, then I think, if we were going to open it to a larger proportion of the population, there is a need to. But I would argue that there is a careful balancing act of that, and that I would like to see not too much of the paying.

Mr Lyons

661. But, surely, if you want to go beyond the usual suspects, you have got to recognise that people need compensation, when they give up part of their job to go and do this public duty?

(Ms Sussman) But, actually, the Cabinet Office are quite interesting about this, because they say that the biggest barrier to women is the child care issue and not the remuneration.

Chairman

662. The evidence that we have got from Operation Black Vote this morning, interestingly enough, talks about it being the number one issue, remuneration?

(Ms Middleton) That is fine, and there are different views in life on everything, and I am sure it is a very important issue; to me, it is one of the top five, it is certainly not the top one, and we know from the thousands of people on our programmes every year. It is definitely one of the issues for the sake of diversity and for pulling more people in, but it is a solution right across the board. People come and say to me, "What are we going to do, no-one's voting?" and you listen to them for an hour, and then you come to the conclusion that the solution is putting polling booths in the back of Tesco. Well, actually, I think there are always issues of mechanism, but there are also issues of inspiration, and we should not get too tied up with the mechanism, and not lose sight of the fact that there is an enormous part of this which is the deal we have in the democracy with citizens, that they have become part of things, and it is reinspiring people with that vision, in itself, needs doing. And, the subject of remuneration, it seems to me to be something that we need to sort; but once it is sorted it is not going to solve the bigger problem, which is inspiring people that what they are doing is worth doing because something will change as a result of it.

Mr Trend

663. Having heard that, I regret going back to the mechanism, but I fear I must. As politicians, we are quite interested in the way that Internet voting may or may not have helped the turnout in the recent elections. I spent a happy hour surfing through your website yesterday, and I can see exactly what you are trying to do, and it seemed to me to be very approachable and something which younger people, in particular, would spend their time doing and think it was profitable; so it was very well done. The Government does this as well. Why did you set up your site; what was the reason you did that?

(Ms Middleton) The 'Just Do Something' site, because, to most citizens, and certainly to me, even having been in this business for the last 12 years, when I look at the 14,000 appointments that are currently on the 'Just Do Something' site, I probably know about 500 of them, that is 13,500 and not a clue that they even existed, the bodies, or that I might even, for a minute, apply to them. It is, one, to make it one place where citizens can see everything, and, two, a place where they can understand it, so that they can double-click and find out what exactly that department or that committee is and where it fits within the structure, because, of course, for normal citizens, understanding the structures of this country is very difficult. And then the third thing is that they need the stories, they need the stories of John Lyons, who has gone and done something, and "Well, if John can do it, I can do it."

664. Did you talk to the Cabinet Office about this before you set up the site, because we had Fi Glover up before us, who does a radio programme late at night, I am tucked up in bed usually by then, and she was trying to apply through the regular Cabinet Office system, and she was finding it difficult.

(Ms Sussman) The register, yes.

665. That is right, and she was finding it very difficult to do this, and they asked her lots of questions she did not think were relevant, and did not know how to fill in large chunks about, I do not know, her strengths and weaknesses, or something, "If I say this, what will the effect be?" It did not give her any help. Have you tried to set up yours to work alongside that, to be a different porthole, because, in the end, they have to fill in a form, I dare say?

(Ms Middleton) Yes, and to help them think things through, saying, you know, "My starter and my finisher; can I really do two days a week, or am I kidding myself; can I really do the amount of travel they are talking about." So that, certainly, as an independent assessor, I have seen huge amounts of applications from people who clearly have not thought it through; and the danger is that they go and end up in the wrong appointment, and that is a great sadness, too. I meet a huge number of Common Purpose graduates, and you say to them, "How did you end up on that committee?" and they say "Well, I got flattered into it." And, as we all know, flattery is a very dangerous thing, because within six months it was not the right thing for them to do anyhow, so they pulled off it. So it is also to try to help citizens

figure out where they can make a contribution, but also where the fit is good, so that it is a satisfying experience on both sides.

666. Did you try to model your website in a way which would complement or help, the Government's website; do you discuss this when you deal with them?

(Ms Middleton) Absolutely, and also with a lot of different organisations, like the Housing Corporation, and also with a lot of different Common Purpose graduates, from BME communities, and from disabled communities, so an enormous amount of different people. But how closed this system is is not to be underestimated.

667. I think any website with the moniker 'gov.' in it puts me off immediately, and I think that may be true perhaps for other people, so I think it is a good idea to have this, but, this is my final question, is there any way of measuring the effectiveness of this, apart from anecdotal things, and can you work out how many people have gone through you; is it more successful than the Government, can you measure that in any way?

(Ms Sussman) Currently, we can measure the people who register on the site and who then pursue contact details, and we are devising a way whereby we get feedback from the Department as to how many people who applied actually came through the site.

(Ms Middleton) But also we can measure, by the number of e-mails that we get back, saying, "I wrote to the Government Department three weeks ago and have not heard anything; do you think they got it, and should I send my application again?" So there is a certain amount that we can do and then it is also about that sense of being welcoming to other people, and, certainly on e-mail, most people expect a relatively quick response; now that may be naive but it is the way the world is. People get confused when their name gets put on a list and disappears, and that there is not a sense of being in contact with somebody who has made quite an important decision for themselves.

(Ms Sussman) The Public Appointments Register, which is the register held, I have heard it referred to as the public disappointment register.

Chairman

668. I thought that was the trail for, that was it, that was very good. Can I just introduce this tricky word 'merit'. I am sorry I have to ask these unworthy questions, but I can think of people who are imbued with civic vision who would be catastrophic on any organisation they had any contact with, and I suspect a good chunk of those might think they were being disappointed by public-appointing bodies. I just wonder how you handle that. I can see the inspirational stuff, the civic vision stuff, but how do you handle this rather tricky stuff, of whether, in fact, these are people who have got a contribution to make?

(Ms Middleton) You just have to handle it. In any application, for any job, there are always going to be some people who cannot do it, and we have all learned, over the years, how to deal with that, with applications.

669. You tell them this on your website, you say, "You may just not be up to it," do you?

(*Ms Middleton*) Sorry, you are talking about my website, most of them are the Government's appointment system. On our website, there is a wizard which asks you eleven questions, and which really tries to encourage you to say, should you be applying to be the chair, if actually you have never done anything as a civic leader before at all; and perhaps, therefore, might you want to start at a more local level first, or whatever it is. So it is there to help people think through the issues. But there may be people, indeed, who do not want to look at the eleven questions at all, they just want to get on with applying; and letting that problem overcome the fact that there are hugely talented people out there. And the amount of times people say, "Well, we could have X, Y or Z do it," and I have said, "Well, actually, if you go out there, you may find somebody even better than X, Y or Z, in fact, infinitely better than X, Y or Z, and actually they will probably still be fit for purpose." And this 'fit for purpose' expression always mystifies me, because there is an issue of fit for purpose and then there is also an issue of credible within the sector or community that that committee serves, and that is just as important, and we need to go out to find those people.

670. I am sorry if you said this in your previous exchange; did you tell us just how many people had secured public appointments through the 'Just Do It' route?

(*Ms Sussman*) The 'Just Do Something' site was launched on May 1, so it is too early.

671. But you will be able, at some point, to know?

(*Ms Sussman*) But we do know, for example, that 308 people have already made contact with organisations through the site.

672. But, as I understand it, you are not just doing public appointments, you are doing charities, too, are you not?

(*Ms Sussman*) Yes; but actually we also know that, I think, 75 per cent of those applications have been made to the public appointments.

673. It will be fascinating to see, in the fulness of time, some of these figures, when they come out?

(*Ms Sussman*) I do not think we are under, your previous point, any illusion that we can make boards work more effectively, ourselves, and that our campaign is not about guaranteeing either that the board is effective or that the applicant will be the best person for the job; but there are lots of practical things that boards are currently doing, and they have been referred to by previous witnesses here, about how boards are getting better at governing themselves.

Sir Sydney Chapman

674. In the information we have got about Common Purpose, I just wondered, a small quote: "Since 1989, more than 60,000 have been involved

in Common Purpose, and over 12,000 leaders from every area of the UK have completed one or more of our programmes." Can you just develop that; what is the difference between the 60,000 people who have been involved and the 12,000 leaders, and what is one of your programmes?

(Ms Middleton) One of our programmes is Leeds Common Purpose, or Exeter Common Purpose, or Cornwall Common Purpose, whereas, as a leader in your community, public, private, voluntary or community, you go on a Common Purpose programme, over about a year, for a day a month, where you learn the language of other sectors, see things through other people's minds. So that if you run a hospital you are probably not that knowledgeable about how things work within the police, or how things work within local authorities, or how things work within a company, so you acquire that knowledge and you begin to develop people who are, as citizens, important assets for that community. The Common Purpose programmes run pretty well all over the country, there are 12,000 people who have been through the Common Purpose programmes, some of them are 14, some of them are 25, the bulk of them are an average age of 38. The 60,000 is a huge broader network of people who speak regularly on our programmes, or contribute regularly to our programmes, or take people on visits, so it is a relatively big network of people who are engaged in being active citizens.

675. That is very helpful, but let us just look into those 12,000 leaders; do most of them come from business, are they sent there by their own businesses?

(Ms Sussman) Forty per cent are.

(Ms Middleton) Forty per cent are from the private sector.

676. You mentioned charities and you mentioned young people, people still at school, and so on. I would like to come back to that just a little later, but could I just pick you up on two things you mentioned. You talked about, and I am deliberately putting this too simply, the two-day-a-week portfolio person, who might only be able to take certain jobs, because it demands a certain amount of time, and one thinks of a self-employed businessman or woman, or whatever, but surely that is the key, is it not, possibly, to a very great range of people you want to encourage, women, whose children might be three or four, or five or six, and may be able, you know, the nursery provision problem, child care, that could open prospects to a great number of people?

(Ms Middleton) Absolutely, but, as everything in life, you can open prospects for one group and actually close prospects for another; also there are a huge number of women who work, and so you cut out a vast proportion of women who work by so doing. So, yes, absolutely, no doubt that is the balancing act of your lives, how do you achieve one thing without undermining another.

677. Another thing you said, at the very beginning, was not your view necessarily, but the perception of people who came to see you was that, oh, well, you get an appointment, and there is a sort of clique there that seem to

get all the appointments; would it be your view that, when speaking of these 30,000, or so, public appointments, as a general proposition, you cannot be absolute, as a general proposition, no person should have more than one appointment?

(Ms Middleton) I have got a full-time job and five children, so I try to do one. Hopefully, when the youngest child is ten, I might have time to do two, I might do quite a good job with two; if I went much over two or three, I think I could not manage it. I am on a number of things occasionally when everybody says, "Ooh, you're no longer the only woman, Julia," and I say, "No, it's really exciting, there are a lot of other women on this committee," but actually none of them turn up to the meeting, I am still the only woman at the meeting, because one does get overcommitted. So I think there is a danger of becoming overcommitted, but I think we need to be a bit careful about deciding absolute numbers that do not make any sense to people. So I would argue, if I see somebody on four or five different major things, I usually go and take them out to supper and say, "Are you mad?"

678. Another point you mentioned, I think you were actually referring to, in a sense, that you would not advise somebody to put in for the chairmanship of a body when they have had no experience in that particular sphere, but the inference is that the right people for the right jobs. But it has been put to us by a number of people that it is very important to have lay people on some of these public appointments, a typical, obvious example, a non-executive director of a health authority, you do not need to have somebody who has been a doctor, or has been a nurse, it might be somebody who is echoing the views of the patient; have you any particular views? I feel yours is a quasi-professional organisation, in seeking to get the right people in the right jobs, and I applaud you for that, but there is also a raft of people in public appointments where it may be important to have people without any direct experience of that particular theatre but can just bring plain commonsense, or the local point of view, or whatever?

(Ms Middleton) Absolutely; and people often say, "Well I know a lot about accountancy, so I suppose I have got to be the treasurer;" and the answer is, "Well, perhaps not, and perhaps you should go on something completely different; and, actually, if you know a great deal about IT, well, perhaps the health sector needs you." So it is that cross-fertilisation. And, indeed, the wizard tries to encourage people not to box themselves off, in terms of their skills, or to convince themselves that they are not an accountant and marketing expert, or a lawyer, "All I know is this community; so therefore I suppose I'm not relevant." Well, the answer is, "If you know this community then you are hugely relevant."

679. Amelia has mentioned the public disappointment register, to use her words, I hasten to add, but the perception of that is that it is somewhat secret and it is organised and it is not quite transparent enough. And I am just wondering, given the work that you have done, with Common Purpose, and 'Do Something', whether we should be thinking of having a national, public register, where people have to get onto it, they could not just put their names on it, but go for an interview, they are seen to have certain strengths, or

whatever, and, of course, locality is a very important thing in public appointments, and it could be a national register, open to everybody, a common register, whatever you want to call it, and this could, in time, become a very useful tool for public appointments to be made from. People go through it and say, "Well, we're going to invite that person for an interview," or this person, and perhaps make recommendations, if they know they have the confidence, that they have gone through the first hurdle. I just wonder if you would like to comment on that?

(Ms Middleton) It strikes me as a perfectly good idea. All I would be eager to do is to encourage nobody to launch it until it was extremely efficient and had the support of all the Government Departments and the consent of most politicians. The terrible thought would be to do that and then disappoint people; that would be a terrible thing to do.

