

Reconnecting People & Politics

✘ *Sarah Boyack MSP considers the recent decline in turnout at elections and the responsibility of politics and politicians to reconnect with people.*

In politics, the focus of politicians and the media is driven by the cyclical nature of elections.

Last month it was the European Parliament. This will be followed closely by September's referendum before the focus shifts to the UK General Election in 2015, the Scottish Elections in 2016 and then local elections in 2017.

After a pause for breath in 2018, the whole cycle begins again – it is a hectic schedule and one in which time seems to move incredibly fast. Although the elections take place on a single day, the parties campaign hard in the months before the elections and increasingly interest and community groups make the most of the chance to hold hustings and debates to focus attention on issues they want elected representatives to tackle.

Voting in elections is a fundamental democratic right, allowing each of us as citizens to hold politicians to account for their actions, but it is one that fewer and fewer of us are exercising.

This was the subject of debate in Parliament last week as MSPs discussed the impact of falling turnout and our responsibility to address it. The debate focused on Local Government elections where turnout has dropped by almost 20% in the space of 13 years. In 2012, less than four in 10 of us chose to cast our votes. You can [watch the full debate here](#).

This debate is partly technical, with a focus on how we can

make it easier for people to register and cast their vote. There are a host of options from encouraging more postal voting to using technology like mobile phones and allowing people to register on the day of an election. These issues are [currently subject to a Scottish Government consultation](#) which was broadly welcomed in the chamber.

However, alongside technical considerations, the nature of politics is at the heart of declining turnout. To put it bluntly, it comes down to a failure of politics, and politicians, to connect with people on the issues that matter to them.

Research into voter turnout identifies that young people and those from less affluent areas are the least likely to vote. This is hugely significant because without action that disconnect can become self-fulfilling and can widen inequalities in our society.

In seeking re-election, politicians attempt to speak to those people in society who are most likely to vote. If large sections of the population who are unhappy simply do not vote, their views are lost from the debate. Essentially, those who vote are represented best.

In a practical demonstration of this effect, research by the IPPR looking at the 2010 General Election found that those who did not vote faced cuts worth 20 per cent of their annual household income, compared to 12 per cent for those who did vote.

Representatives at all levels, and the political parties that they stand for, have a responsibility to address this vicious cycle and the inequality that it propagates by working to re-engage with local communities.

As Labour's Local Government spokesperson, I strongly believe that local authorities have a fundamental role to play. Councils and councillors are responsible for so many of the

services that we all rely on in our day-to-day lives. A significant proportion of the casework I receive from constituents relates to council services like housing, schools and planning.

I want to see local authorities empowered to give them the flexibility to adapt to the most pressing issues in their communities. By the same token, authorities need to engage with local communities to involve them in decisions about how services are designed and delivered in their communities.

Political parties also need to organise themselves in a way that involves people. In 2011 I led a review of the Labour Party in Scotland that went back to first principles of who we are and what we stand for. The process focused minds on how we can make the party more representative of the communities we serve. For example, we want to encourage more women, more young people and more people from ethnic minority communities into our party and then to stand for election as representatives so that their experience can inform our politics. I've blogged before about the [need for mainstream politics to be more inclusive](#).

But in my amendment for our debate I believe we also need to counterbalance the centralism that's been encouraged since the 2007 by encouraging and enabling local authorities to fulfil their civic leadership potential, promoting local action, empowering individuals and groups to have a real stake in their communities. By encouraging representatives and parties at all levels to be more proactive, we can begin to repair links between people and politics.

The above article first appeared on Sarah Boyack MSP's blog, www.sarahboyack.com.