

Education, population, poverty, tax...getting views on topics like those in Jersey isn't the difficult part – but have you ever noticed how many people sound eminently credible when talking about them, even though they may actually be basing their views on conjecture, false facts and blind guesswork?

There is a real danger in making the 'facts' fit the opinion, rather than the other way around – which is exactly the point at which someone with an eye on the latest buzzwords will smugly insert the phrase 'post-truth' into the conversation, imagining its actually helpful.

So, we've asked the Jersey Policy Forum to add some robust material to those crucial local debates – the point is not to provoke agreement or acquiescence; it is to provide reliable material on which others can build their views.

**You might think that being (just a little) interested in the decisions which will affect your life is pretty sensible; every few years you might even stop by your parish hall (other polling stations are available) and make two short lines on a piece of paper to indicate someone who you think will do good things for the Island. It doesn't sound much to ask, particularly as we approach the centenary of a time when people died just to be able to do it. But as we all know, so few of us bother to vote. We choose not to take part in the system which governs our lives.**

**This month, the JPF look at the issue of voter turnout – why is it so low in Jersey?**

**by Mark Egan, States Greffier**

Last summer there was a by-election for one of the senatorial positions in Jersey's States Assembly. Electors from across the Island could choose who would fill the role, often considered to be the most senior of the three categories of membership in the States Assembly. Eleven candidates stood and there was a lively campaign, with posters plastering the island and ample media coverage. There were hustings meetings in each parish and a film from each meeting was published online. Every household on the

island received a booklet including each candidate's manifesto, and details of where and when to vote. To make things easier, people could vote in town in the week leading up to polling day. The by-election came at a critical juncture when the Assembly was about to consider ministers' medium-term financial plan, setting spending limits for States departments for the next three years. The plan also included a variety of new charges including a 'health charge' which, if agreed to, would lead to every taxpayer paying an

**additional contribution to help fund the increasing costs of health and social care.**

The turnout in the by-election, won by Sarah Ferguson, was a meagre 19 per cent. In Town, fewer than one voter in six turned out to vote. Such a low level of political participation in a parliamentary election should be a cause of concern to anyone interested in the good health of Jersey's democracy.

Election turnout tends to be lower in Jersey than elsewhere. In only one senatorial election since 1990 has turnout exceeded 50 per cent. Turnout is consistently higher in the rural parishes compared to St Helier, and other more urban districts. Various reasons have been advanced to explain this: perhaps Jersey's political system is too complex; the absence of a party system might make it difficult for voters to make a choice; perhaps many voters are content with how the Island's affairs are managed and have little motivation to vote; many incomers might not feel they have a significant stake in Jersey society, particularly if they intend to move away from the Island in due course. The range of plausible reasons for low political participation can be overwhelming, and may lead to the conclusion that nothing can be done or that only a complete overhaul of the system can improve matters.

As an optimist, I do not subscribe to the view that low election turnout is inevitable. I am convinced that there are ways of improving engagement between the States Assembly and the public of the Island. A variety of new projects and initiatives to achieve this were set out in a report I put to the Assembly's Privileges and Procedures Committee late last year, which it endorsed and published (<http://www.statesassembly.gov.je/AssemblyReports/2017/R.5-2017.pdf>). What are the highlights? Firstly, we should do more to promote the work we already do to engage with the public. For example, we should make more of the fact that every Year 5 child gets the chance to sit in the Assembly and to hold debates on issues they choose. All of the Assembly's meetings are now webcast and footage can be broadcast on television and shared on social media. The [vote.je](http://vote.je) website is a model of how to publish information

**THINK-TANK**



**Election turnout tends to be lower in Jersey than elsewhere. In only one senatorial election since 1990 has turnout exceeded 50 per cent.**

about elections, from manifestos to results. However, there is a lot more to do.

We are working on a new website which is based on user needs and helps people find the information they want more easily. This will continue the process of opening up the Assembly's work. I am also keen to ensure the information we publish – and there's a lot of it – meets 'open data' standards so it can be shared and manipulated by users. A good example of that is with the record of what gets said in the Assembly – known as Hansard. At the moment we publish enormous documents covering hours of debate which are rich in detail about what Jersey's politicians

are doing, but which are hard to analyse. We will soon be letting a new contract for Hansard, central to which will be a rethink of how our debates are transcribed so that data about Members' contributions can be extracted much more easily than is possible today. Combined with voting data this would help voters see at a glance which issues their representatives usually speak about, the positions they take and the way they vote in the Assembly.

Interactivity is also crucial, including, for example, making it easier for people to give their views to the committees which scrutinise ministers' policies and legislation. In May, the Assembly will be debating the introduction of petitioning by email. E-petitions have worked well in other jurisdictions, leading to subjects which might otherwise not get much parliamentary airtime being debated and given serious consideration by government. People who have submitted e-petitions can also be sent links to the relevant debates so they can see for themselves how their concerns were debated.

Inevitably much of our new focus rests on digital development, but an important strand of work involves raising awareness of the Assembly's history. Not many places in the world can boast a parliamentary institution which has lasted for over 500 years. This is a history to be recognised, celebrated and cherished. The Assembly is part of the fabric of Jersey's society and the Island should be proud of it. In June, we are launching an exhibition on the 130th anniversary of the Assembly's Chamber which we hope to combine with some public tours of the building.

The underlying theme of all this work is to bring the work of the Assembly and its politicians closer to the people who elect it and pay for it, supporting and supplementing political work which is often unsung and misunderstood. None of these initiatives alone will solve Jersey's political participation problem but in combination they can begin reinvigorating the Island's political life, which is a goal everyone who wants Jersey to prosper should share.