

Contributions to:  
The Hansard Society's Digital Dialogues Pilot  
for The Department of Constitutional Affairs  
By Wendy Stern and Joe Pritchard, Action for Involvement,



---

Action for Involvement was able to contribute to this important research because Wendy was invited to respond to an online survey of her personal use of David Milliband's (DM) blog. considered AFI could contribute to the online survey.

### Wendy's response to The Hansard Society's online survey

**Aim of blog?** from recollection I think the blog focus is to make DM appear to be far more likable, approachable and generally more accessible than may typically be the case with most MPs.

**What you liked?** I was very pleasantly surprised to find DM had taken the time & trouble to comment on the unjustifiably bad press young people have been attracting;

**What you would change?** Many respondents made important contributions on central issues affecting all aspects of our environment including pollution, Peak Oil; sustainability and global warming. It was rare for DM to address these comments which created the distinct impression of distance and which I found had the opposite effect to that intended when starting the blog. I would therefore like to see DM:

1. become more personally and actively involved in communicating with commentators on his blog.
2. use less formal language than has been the case in instances when he has tried to reinforce points he wanted to make, eg "For the avoidance of doubt" when discussing the costs incurred in running his blog.
3. a far greater degree of transparency; my posts for example were edited to remove implied or apparent criticism of the apparent inability of Trading Standards to ensure the corporate retail sector complies with their statutory duties under the legislation pertaining to excess packaging. Increased transparency can be effected by sending an email to the contributor with their contribution as it is sent to DM.

To further the interests of transparency, it would also be very useful to publish the stats of actual contributions received each week; how many contributions were amended before posting to blog and how many were not posted at all with the reasons for such decisions.

**Blogging: a positive or negative development in political engagement?** At this stage it remains to be seen whether inputs, comments & concerns from the general public on this or indeed other political blogs are weighted appropriately in the

Contributions to:  
The Hansard Society's Digital Dialogues Pilot  
for The Department of Constitutional Affairs  
By Wendy Stern and Joe Pritchard, Action for Involvement,



---

decision-making process; I think this is partly due to the lack of dialogue from the Minister with those who comment on his blog.

Another significant factor in all of this is use of online pseudonyms can have the effect of reducing the blogger's credentials & credibility regardless of the viability of their inputs. The validity of my concern is borne out by the recent disclosure that a Wiki contributor had been passing themselves off as a University Professor when the truth was that they were nothing other than a 24 year old University dropout!! Transparency issues can be resolved easily and simply by emailing posters a copy of their text at the same time as it is sent to DM for consideration before uploading on to his blog.

Thinking about my trawl around DMs blog, I recall seeing a number of *vigorous* comments criticising DM & his Dept staff for having failed to respond to their correspondence addressed to the Dept and were posting on his blog out of frustration. Their posts on DMs blog would also appear to be ignored and as such would seem to suggest their concerns are being disregarded.

It also occurs to me from comments posted on to the site that Dept staff may be confused about the purpose of their role and what is expected of them in terms of interfacing with public & enforcement of legislation, Statutory Instruments and regulations. The most classic example I could find on the site (if my memory serves me correctly I think there was a person highly dissatisfied with building & planning regs enforced by the Leeds Office for the Norwich area; they complained that the Leeds Office could hardly be expected to know what was happening in Norwich - a reasonable assumption because Leeds and Norwich are at opposite ends of the country and regionally so very different!!!

#### **Action for Involvement's contribution**

AFI endorse the views set out above by our Secretary Wendy Stern who responded to this questionnaire in her personal capacity. We also believe democracy needs informed conversation and public debate led not just by government, or mass media, but by people sharing information in new ways in order to create new kinds of open and public debates aimed at involving everyone.

People are beginning to make their own news by writing citizen journals; we can expect the dynamic to change due to new technology which will play a far bigger role in public debate. Young people are going to the internet to find news rather than reading newspapers.

We therefore consider blogs, pod-casting and text messaging are the way forward to communicate, particularly with younger people who are our future.

Contributions to:  
The Hansard Society's Digital Dialogues Pilot  
for The Department of Constitutional Affairs  
By Wendy Stern and Joe Pritchard, Action for Involvement,



---

By giving people the means to be better informed, we can help people organise themselves more effectively and efficiently both on the political and social fronts. We also consider that community groups and organisations need to understand how to utilise and benefit from new media such as the internet, pod-casting, citizen's journals, particularly the power of blogging and how to utilise it effectively.

Our views are borne out and informed by concerns expressed by the likes of Mirror Group Editor, David Seymour, who has publicly said he believes there will be fewer newspapers in 10 - 20 years time because big papers are moving towards new communications technology.

It is self-evident we are in a transition with Blogs. Whatever people say, we at AFI think most Blogs are still effectively one way streets - it's a sort of subscription email list without cluttering your inbox. Blogging as a tool of participation is feasible, but for now people doing it just don't *'get it'* yet. And, people posting responses don't get it either.

Most organisations would be better off using a Blog on to which comments could be posted, but with an easily available 'Help Me' 'checkbox' that either sends a mail to someone with responsibility for handling the cries for Help, OR doesn't even post the message to the Blog but actually puts it in to a 'Helpdesk' style workstream. Given the nature of the vociferous concerns raised on DMs blog would be a constructive and positive step forward.

### Wendy's additional comments

Thinking more of our emails [to The Hansard Society) and personal research on FoE [Friends of the Earth] blog: [www.foe.co.uk/forum/index.php/topic,3754.0.html](http://www.foe.co.uk/forum/index.php/topic,3754.0.html). Although I haven't done any extensive trawling around the FOE site, the little I did see, inspired my confidence in that it gained the distinct impression that they had considered the concerns of their users and were very keen to facilitate openness and transparency of communications between them and the way they used the blog to interface with the public.

It is also so interesting to see that FoE clearly defined the role and boundaries of their director's responsa to the public and that, busy as he must clearly be, he still manages to make time to respond personally to contributors - infinitely more encouraging than DMs blog.

Were DMs blog to adopt a similar model, I would be reassured about the way his Department might use the suggested Help feature. As things stand, I fear it could be open to abuse in that anything that could be seen to be at all critical would be siphoned off in to the "Help" channel, perhaps without ever having any intention of resolving the issues raised by negative contributors.