



# Independent (UK) Constitutionalists

## A Democracy Fit for the 21st Century?

### THOUGHTS ON WHAT IT MIGHT MEAN

**How should the Democracy Sector define democracy?** We in the Democracy Sector use the word 'democracy' on an almost daily basis. It's in the title of many of our initiatives. You emphasize one aspect of it you believe to be important, I another. It's constantly on our lips. You have your definition, I have mine. But do our definitions line up? Is it not time, before we take our messages any further, for us to agree on what we're actually talking about? What follows is an attempt to move the Sector towards a shared vision of what basically **A Democracy Fit for the 21st Century** might look like.

**The Planet is in multiple crises.** Our current political and economic system is clearly failing us. And at the heart of this failure is a crisis of democracy. Whatever definition of democracy we agree upon, it is patently clear that the current forms of **Elective-representative Democracy (ERD)**, that confine citizen participation to voting at distant intervals, especially as practised in the USA and UK, are failing our societies: citizen exclusion from the political processes resulting from the centralization of political power has led to a crippling democratic deficit. People feel disempowered, are exasperated by politics and politicians and, in their frustration, reach for identity and division in order to give meaning to their lives.

### Humans are social creatures

We humans are social creatures, not merely competitive as some would have us believe, but, by nature, also deeply collaborative. We depend on each other and on preserving the environment that sustains ourselves and other living species. In times past, when communities were small, within tribe and clan reputation and local tradition were often enough to regulate our behaviour as individuals. In today's multi-tribal world, however, with its large and complex societies, if we are to survive and prosper as a species, we need to find new ways of relating to each other and to our environment. We need, in other words, to learn to reconcile our immediate interests as individuals with the longer-term interests of the communities to which we belong. Rethinking the way we do democracy will need to be part of this process.

## So, what might the alternative be; what might a genuine Democracy Fit for the 21st Century look like?

- Genuine democracy, we maintain, should be about people being involved in, having control over and identifying with the decisions that affect their lives. It becomes possible when citizen participation combines with accountable representation. The extent to which any community enables its members to be involved is the measure of how genuinely democratic the community is. We call it **Participatory-representative Democracy** or **PRD**.
- It will also involve tackling the problem of **centralized political power**. Power is commonly defined as “the ability to influence and direct the behaviour of other people and guide the course and outcome of events.” But just how accurate is this definition? And how far does it get us? Is not power essentially the ability to act or produce an effect? It derives from agency, the human individual’s capacity to decide and to do. That capacity becomes political power, and its effect increased, when citizens consent to pool their agency in order to work together. Where such consent is lacking, however, power begins to be a problem: it becomes centralised, concentrated in the hands of self-interested individuals or unrepresentative groups who are then able or allowed to think and decide for others. Provided agency or **decision-making power** remains **dispersed**, and is not allowed, other than through **mandated and truly accountable representation**, to disconnect towards the centre, it ceases to be a problem. It is only informed scrutiny through greater citizen involvement that will prevent this disconnect occurring. In short, **Power “with” needs to replace power “over”**. Gross inequalities of wealth and education will need to be overcome if informed and consenting citizens are to play their essential part and to assume the responsibilities that belong to them.
- Another problem that needs to be addressed is that posed by **Parliamentary Sovereignty**. Is it not the people who are sovereign, in whom all real power (as just defined) ultimately resides.? It is they who delegate a defined measure of that power to national Parliaments and regional Assemblies to legislate and to form governments, thus avoiding the practical impossibility of their making and enforcing laws directly. Parliaments exist essentially as representative institutions not as substitutes. They speak for the people they represent and are responsible for converting the “will of the people” into law. Where that “will” remains unarticulated or its voice ignored, as currently in the UK, Parliaments begin to decide for themselves, power becomes centralized, the representative tail begins to wag the democratic dog! In the UK at the moment, it would hardly be an exaggeration to say the representative tail has detached from the dog altogether, and is wagging on its own. The UK’s representative processes will need to be sanitized and the means of meaningful citizen participation set in place. A reformed structure of political organisation (SPO) needs to be established and the new democratic settlement set out in a **written constitution** that is widely consented to, accessible and understood. In short, the principle of **People Sovereignty**, we maintain, needs to replace that of **Parliamentary Sovereignty**.
- What then might **meaningful citizen participation** look like? The latter will need to take the form of a bottom-up and ongoing citizen-led process. Get this right, and the outcomes (in terms

of social justice - meeting the needs of all citizens within planetary limits) will begin to take care of themselves. After all, who better to judge the wisdom of an action than those affected by it? Equally, it will need to embody the **subsidiarity principle** whereby decisions are taken by citizens at the appropriate level, by those most affected. The more the members of a community are involved in the processes of decision-making, the more they will identify with, feel responsible for and take ownership of what is done: **rights and responsibilities will begin to connect. We can no longer afford to outsource our collective thinking to others to do for us.**

Further, **deliberation** in the decision-making and monitoring processes will need to be subject to the necessary democratic disciplines: listening well, and empathetically asking oneself why the other person holds the opinions they do hold, articulating one's own opinion with care and respect in recognition of the attention one is being accorded - i.e., talking "with" rather than "at". These disciplines and the practices they engender apply equally at all levels of governance and within all social-economic institutions. Finally, participatory democracy or PRD is not so much about the number of people involved as about (1) the extent to which the people involved are representative, for example a pocket-version, of the communities they stand and speak for, and (2) the extent to which the deliberative processes themselves reflect sound participative practice. The latter ensures quality decisions that are optimal if only by reason of the consent they enjoy.

- Once a community, through the participatory practice outlined above, has decided what it wants to do, if other communities are involved, its intentions must be carried forward through **accountable representation**. Without clear mandates and instructions, representatives or spokespersons have nothing to represent or to speak for. Such has increasingly been the case in the UK where Parliamentary Sovereignty (in practice Westminster government sovereignty) substitutes for People Sovereignty. This needs to change. From now on, elected representatives will need to remain accountable through feedback to the communities they speak for, and their function not defined by arbitrary time-frames but by their ability and willingness to discharge their representative duties responsibly.
- Democracy, then, will need to be seen as an inclusive process of **consensus-building**, accommodation and compromise. Voting someone "in" to think and act for you every five or so years is a far cry from PRD, still less if for all practical purposes voting one party "in" means voting others "out". We can no longer afford to allow democracy to be confined to the winner-loser competitive entertainment that it is increasingly becoming. Voting, although necessary in some circumstances, must be seen for what it really is: a measure of division.
- Finally, at what **polity (or population) size** might PRD most likely yield improvements on the current centralised systems of national governance? Answer: polities of up to and around 5 million persons. Examples in the UK are Scotland, Wales and N. Ireland. And, at the English regional level, why not Yorkshire with its population of just over 5 million? Functioning examples elsewhere in Europe are Germany with its 16 Länder, Switzerland with its 26 Cantons, and to a lesser extent France with its 13 Metropolitan Regions. Other examples are national polities of around this size: Denmark, Norway, Finland, Singapore and New Zealand.

## A Democracy fit for the 21st Century ... New Tools

- **Proportional Representation must replace First-Past-the-Post** (to break the party-political strangle-hold and deadlock);
- **Recognition and support** for non-party, independent Parliamentary Candidates who are prepared to speak for the communities and constituencies they represent and abide by the Bell principles - strong government does not necessarily equate with good governance;
- **Constitutions** Statements that set out in plain language the shared values and purposes of a community or institution and the rules by which they would wish to govern themselves
- **Subsidiarity-based decentralisation of decision-making and budgetary control** - Devolution towards **Regional Self-governance**
- **Recognised status for Sortition-selected & fully-facilitated Citizen Assemblies and Panels** (pocket versions of the communities they stand for)
- **A fully-functioning Resulture** Permanent, publicly-funded structures for feedback on the impact of policies
- **Fully independent media and social-media branches** subject to permanent democratic scrutiny
- **Training in deliberative practice** in all places of learning
- For all citizens - **Adequate freely-available education** and **A guaranteed annual income**

## Economic Thinking fit for the 21st Century ... Some Essentials ... ?

**Doughnut economics** - meeting the needs of all within the planet's finite boundaries.

**Circular economics** - creating the highest possible use value for manufactured goods for the longest possible time (through repair, remanufacture, upgrades, retrofits and the production of as-new resources from molecule recovery) while consuming as few material resources and energy as possible.

**Performance economics** - promoting business models whereby user acquisition and ownership of products at a given point of sale is replaced by rental of their service value or performance over time. Producer liability is thereby extended to cover product-life including end of service disposal, and user stewardship engaged.

**Fiscal Reform** - promoting a shift of the current tax burden on productive labour (Income Tax) and consumption (VAT) to revenue-raising by fees on the use of land and non-renewable resources (like minerals, metals, fossil fuels), on end-of-product-life waste disposal activities like incineration or landfilling, and on all private commercial use of other assets and commons of community value, examples being the electromagnetic spectrum and outer space. In particular, restoring thereby the unproductive and largely untaxed gains from the constant uplift in land-location value to the public purse.

**Monetary reform** - use of debt-free Sovereign Money and creation, as in Alaska and Norway, of Sovereign Wealth Funds at regional and national level

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