

# Deepening Democracy: Partnering tribalism with citizenship

Peter Cock

## Introduction

Democracy evolved through blood, sweat and tears over generations of aspirations to participate in shaping society. The journey isn't finished and its story of ups and downs of opportunities and movement is particularly expressed in the history of Europe and America. Now is a time when we can regenerate hope and commitment to a deepened, enriched experience of what democracy can be. There is the need and the opportunity to take another significant step forward in evolving our capacity to be engaged and powerful citizens. Our over-consuming citizens are part of the coming disaster and need to be part of the solutions. These begin with the transformation of our governance.

We now have the technological capacity to take power back to the people, to be involved in the decisions which impact on their lives and to reconnect the people with the earth. We have the power to transform and deepen how we govern

ourselves. There is still a long way to go to realising the dream 'of the people, by the people, for the people'.

One difficulty facing deepening democracy is the West's perception that, from a global perspective, it is as good as it can get. When we consider the effort to vote made by those recently released from dictatorship, such a perception is understandable.

The necessary revitalized vision of citizenship involves a multilayered participatory democracy, whose empowered citizens have the capacity to directly shape the decisions that most affect their lives and their offspring.

This begins with the rebuilding of grass roots power to reshape and empower local places and to directly have a say in national and global politics and policy. Such a vision is committed to building real partnerships between those who know and those seeking to know, to create a new synergy between citizens and the professional classes.

## **Disempowerment of family and neighbourhood**

The decline in the size and stability of our families and households is one of the fundamental problems facing where we live and whom we live with. More than 20% are single person households, rising with 50% of marriages ending in divorce. Allied with more transient lifestyles this means that a local

'community' can be reconstituted within a 3-5 year period.

We can no longer rely on biologically constructed extended families and their commitment to place as the core of our support, engagement and joy in life. Neighbourhoods have little reason to know each other or connect when power lies elsewhere.

We need to reach out and recreate new senses of community. Virtual Facebook communities are one pathway forward as are communities of shared interests. I wonder however if they offer limited depth and commitment, especially for personal development.

To thrive amid the challenges of our interpersonal relations and to radically reduce our ecological footprint we need to reclaim local places and their people as a focal point for our lives. This means working towards the redevelopment of the city as a cluster of interdependent villages.

We can never be self or community sufficient. We need wider worlds of engagement that locate our local personal worlds within a larger world. This reduces our excessive dependency on being just local, curtails NYMB attitudes and assist in dealing with local vulnerabilities such as fire and flood. The challenge is to find balances between local, national and global governance that work.

## **Decentralization of power to local communities and streets**

National citizenship gradually came to dominate and replace tribalism. Its advocates criticise tribalism for its closed oppressive hierarchical mini societies.

There is now a declining risk of becoming trapped in the closed world of the one tribe or village.

Nationalism and the technology of global communications are liberating developments from the excesses of such tribalism.

Today we face the opposite extremes; over choice, excessive mobility and individual responsibility.

Excessive individualism has stripped the citizen of the local community belonging that offers countervailing power to the state. Personal environments are often devoid of stability, of a range of significant others and resources and meaning that is no longer gifted but having to be created. As a consequence citizens are vulnerable to being manipulated by large institutions, feeling alienated, powerless and falling into addiction and mental illness.

A new tribalism that is virtual and real, distant and face-to-face, diverse and often involving plural tribal commitments, is a vital journey towards a deeper engagement in society. Deepening democracy at the local level could begin with the facilitation of neighbourhood decision-making powers. Allocating a percentage of local rates for street community projects would enable communities to shape local

infrastructure and services. This would enable new tribal members to not only focus on their own backyard and their immediate family needs but also broaden their focus to include the needs of their whole neighbourhood. People could for instance be able to control local speed limits, shape neighbourhood watch programs, manage a local park, and select or ban certain types of businesses within their neighbourhood. Particularly important is the capacity to generate at least some of our own neighbourhood power, water and food. Such empowerment would build community resilience and thereby reduce dependence on the state and large corporations. This would re-educate the community in learning to live together.

Major barriers to this are professional elites hiding behind unnecessary complexity that protects their monopoly power. Monopoly knowledge can 'dumb down' the population and thereby justify continuing elite professional power. This 'dumbing down' occurs in all fields of knowledge, whether in health, law, politics, media, plumbing, building, planning, and gardening. Empowerment of citizenship and building partnerships will help to break the grip of drug companies over health policy and unions over trades, as examples.

'Learning by doing' democracy raises consciousness and increases engagement through having the right and responsibility to directly participate in policy formation. Deepening democracy includes reshaping professional-client relations to one of shared

partnership. The obligation to educate as part of professional services and fees should be fundamental to the ethics of expertise. The implementation of such a directive will 'wise up' our citizens over time and therefore has the capacity to reduce dependence and increase the prevention of our social and environmental ills.

## **Limits of shallow democracy**

Rebuilding community grass roots is fundamental to making the deepening of democracy possible. It is a counterbalance to distant 'over governing', of asking too much of big government and too little of local communities. Unlike the extreme rights' pursuit of freedom from government, I see the need for community governance as a balancing response that makes community-supported individual responsibility possible, rather than a mythical dream.

As part of deepening democracy, I see the possibility of liberating big government from the stranglehold of vested interest. Nominally we have a representative democracy, where every three or four years the people elect representatives to participate on their behalf in the political system. But vested institutional interests, money, and professional political parties largely control this, leaving many of the electorate manipulated victims. It is no wonder that apathy is widespread and interests so narrowly defined.

Governments are generally good at making decisions in contrast to their ability to follow through and implement. Accountability, transparency, community engagement are declining, with people becoming increasingly apathetic and narrowly self-interested.

“Ballot boxes alone are nothing like enough. Unless solid laws protect individual and minority rights, and government power is limited by clear checks, at the very least, a culture of compromise—coupled with greater accountability and limits on state power” (The Economist, Dec 1<sup>st</sup> 2010).

The excessive governmental paternalism of the nanny state strips people of incentive and the capacity to act for themselves. At the same time the threat is also of a police state, legitimated in the name of security against terrorists or just to protect the monopoly power of the few. Now the ecological crisis compounds the risk of ‘over government’. When choices become more limited and demands more radical, the pressure for authoritarian rule grows. In a crisis we may no longer have the time to educate and engage with citizens, so we decide for them. The risk is that both are occurring rather than one or the other.

## **Mechanisms to empower?**

We know that the quality of governance is shaped by longstanding traditions of civic engagement, or its absence. Voter turnout, newspaper readership, participation in the NGO sector, membership in choral

societies and football clubs all help to make democracy work better. They are stepping-stones of community participation that add to participant well-being and social contribution. (See Putnam). However such engagement risks diverting attention from the larger policy and structural issues. Too much of the energy of those who care is consumed by 'welfarism'; of helping those less well off rather than challenging those too well off, whose excessive wealth and power to shape society continues the exploitation of the planet and its citizens.

In Switzerland and in California citizens have more direct access to shaping policy development. In California if you can get enough people to support a proposal the government is forced to hold a referendum. In Switzerland, citizens vote directly on any number of issues. In Australia very few proposals are put directly to the citizens and when they do, most of them fail, the last being the referendum on the republic. To be successful a referendum needs a majority overall as well support from at least four states. The constitutions' creators made it hard for the people to directly determine policy. We need to change this as part of becoming a republic.

## **Liberation via the Internet.**

The internet's potential isn't just about making our representatives more honest. Making governments more transparent still leaves us looking to them to do all the governing. Wikileaks has revealed not only the

internet's potential power to bring governments to account but its possibilities in reawakening and deepening citizens' engagement in building a partnership with our elected representatives. A central issue is the relative power of the citizen vote to shape or control policy. Already, public opinion polling shapes decisions by elected politicians and influences political party policy and as does lobbying by vested interests. GetUp is an example of an independent, not-for-profit community campaigning group that uses new technology to empower Australians to have their say on important national issues. There is a risk however that opinion polling has too much of an indirect say on policy without the constraint that may come with knowing that your opinion on a matter directly counts. Superficial, reactive populism can inhibit wise consideration of the complexity and uncertain consequences of policy choices.

Over which issues should citizens have a direct say? Going to war, euthanasia, and population size? Clearly there have to be limits for the citizen's sake, as much as anybody else. A move towards direct decision-making needs a gradual evolution, beginning with for example a 30 % weighting of citizens' voting to that of elected representatives. In the long run, progressive steps towards direct democracy need to reduce the gap between professionals who consider the variables and their likely consequences, with citizens who may not.

The best place to start expanding the role of direct voting may be through the budget. For example, what percentage should be spent on different areas, such as defence versus the environment, education versus welfare?

The challenge is how far do we go and how quickly along the path of empowering citizens through enabling more direct democracy? While this has the potential to transform democracy in the long run, once the path is set out, it should evolve in stages with reviews along the way to see what mix of elected professional/citizen power works best over what issues? This needs to permeate all levels of society, especially at the local and national levels.

Existing democratic structures may also require restructuring, for example six-year terms for representatives, proportional representation, transparency and accountability, perhaps abolishing the states. Changes will need to focus on governmental responsibility and should enable elected representatives to focus on big and complex policy issues and on the long-term public interest, reducing their vulnerability to the whims of public or vested opinion.

## **Globalization of democracy**

The focus here is on two basic levels of government—the very local and the national. There are implications also for the development of global governance. This could be via direct citizen input into

the G20 and the UN. However there needs to not only be the development of software and security systems to facilitate and protect citizen participation, radical reform of global institutions should include NGOs as well as direct citizen participation.

## **Conclusion**

Maybe the first question to consider is what should remain in our individual citizens' hands in the local community and what at state, national and global levels? Less government may be needed in some areas and more in others? At which level? For example should more of basic needs provision be at a more personal and local level and ecology at global levels?

The inequality in the distribution of knowledge is as important as that of material goods. Materialism and its trickledown effect mask more important life engagements, which help citizens to choose a life that has inherent meaning. A paradox is that facebook, twitter, blogging and online shopping are first steps towards an empowered citizenry. As it is creating more of a learning society by engaging in the communication revolution's opportunities for local and global web weaving.

The risk is that we leave it too late and instead of transforming democracy we end up in a fascist state, legitimated by the consequences of eco catastrophe.

The first revolution in governance was the replacement of dictatorship with representative democracy. The next is for a direct participatory one. The future needs and hopefully we are evolving towards a diversity of sources of domains of authority that mean the individual isn't excessively dependent on either the power of the state, corporations or the village/tribe. This will deepen citizenship and grow wisdom throughout our society and with it a core of consensus about what matters in our lives.

Notes

Liberty victoria

Whistleblowers

Slf

Oases

Ceres

Moora moora