

# IGNORANCE AND INCLUSION, MR JEFFERSON, MIGHT BE GOOD FOR DEMOCRACY

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### Introduction

In September 2009, I spent my nights in a cottage in the foothills of Monticello, in Charlottesville, Virginia. Thomas Jefferson, America's third president, designed Monticello and had it constructed in 1768 (when he was merely 25 years old), then lived there until his death on July 4, 1826 (on the 50th anniversary of the enactment of the Declaration of Independence). I enjoyed a tour of the mansion, restored to its former glory, with its meticulously-maintained estate. My days were spent reading in the nearby Jefferson Library. My pursuit was an understanding of the overlap between Mr Jefferson's thought and contemporary theories and practice of deliberative democracy.

In a letter to Robert Pleasants, August 27, 1796 Jefferson noted that ignorance and despotism seem made for each other<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, mass, formal education was seen by Jefferson as a pre-requisite for responsible citizenship and enduring government. This idea has the ring of truth and appears impervious to challenge. Counter-intuitive is the proposition that ignorance could be good for democracy. However, deliberative democrats have no difficulty with such a proposition. As an Australian, I came to Monticello with my eyes wide open.

Jefferson held that people are born in readiness—*tabula rasa* perhaps—to accept new knowledge and experience. As the primary author of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson inscribed that all men are created equal. He may have meant that while they were created equally by God,, men had much work to do to acquire his immense intellect, with only the best nurturing.

Jefferson treated his slaves as though they were children "... denying them the dignity of maturity and the right of decision-making"<sup>2</sup>, never quite believing that they could do more than follow orders, or respond to their "natural" instincts. White folks were also limited in their abilities<sup>3</sup>. He said

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<sup>1</sup> See John P. Kaminski, 2006, *The Quotable Jefferson*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, p. 140).

<sup>2</sup> Fawn M. Brodie, 1974, *Thomas Jefferson. An Intimate History*, Eyre Methuen, London, p. 432. Jefferson's attitude to his slaves, considered benign, is well documented and not the subject of this paper. See, for example, Lucia Stanton, 1996, *Slavery at Monticello*, The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation; Annette Gordon-Reid, 2008, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family*, WW Norton & Co; Annette Gordon-Reid, 1997, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*, University Press of Virginia.

<sup>3</sup> Ellis (p. 61) quotes Jefferson thus: "I have ever observed that a choice by the people themselves is not generally distinguished for its wisdom". Joseph J. Ellis, 1997, *American Sphinx*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

little about women. Though he railed against monarchists and aristocrats, Jefferson spoke of a “natural aristocracy among men”.<sup>4</sup> He clearly belonged to that group and enjoyed the company of those similarly blessed, a club of like-minded men<sup>5</sup>. Despite this, Jefferson thought that exceptional young students could reach those giddy heights if separated from the dross and subjected to special attention. He advocated scholarships for the brightest boys and stated: “By this means twenty of the best geniuses will be raked from the rubbish annually<sup>6</sup>... “.

Furthermore, Jefferson thought that republican government should be protected from its inevitable decline into corruption and disarray<sup>7</sup> as men failed to resist their human tendency toward the abuse of power<sup>8</sup>. He saw the best defence against that inevitability as being an educated citizenry. Education was the heart of his republicanism. He devised a system of public education and decentralised decision making through wards to enable that to happen. His wards never eventuated but his University of Virginia did<sup>9</sup>. It was a radical institution for its day and demonstrates just how

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<sup>4</sup> Jefferson, Thomas (1907) *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Albert Ellery Bergh, 20 vols, ‘Definitive’ edition, sponsored by Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association; Washington, DC. Accessed September 2009 <http://www.constitution.org/tj/jeff.htm> hereafter referred to as *Writings*. This reference: *Writings*, XIII 396, Letter to John Adams, October 28, 1813. Jefferson was notorious for espousing one thing and practising another. For example, his “... colossal shopping sprees in Paris—he bought two thousand books and sixty-three paintings—betrayed a cavalier disregard for his crushing debts as well as the slaves whose labor serviced them. While Jefferson’s Parisian life seems to contradict his politics, he was embraced by a group of Enlightenment aristocrats who exhibited the same exquisite contradictions.” Ron Chernow, 2004, *Alexander Hamilton*, New York: The Penguin Press, p. 314

<sup>5</sup> For example, The American Philosophical Society of which Jefferson was president for 17 years from 1797 to 1814 (a member from 1780), see Rick Britton, 2008, *Jefferson. A Monticello Sampler*, Buena Vista, VA: Mariner Publishing, p. 62 and p.78. John Adams favoured a system of government with a “separate deliberative body for the social aristocracy” whereas Jefferson thought a natural aristocracy could be sifted like wheat from chaff, thereby eliminating pseudo-aristocrats (see Gary Hart, 2002, *Restoration of the Republic: The Jeffersonian Ideal in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America*, Oxford University Press, p.130).

<sup>6</sup> *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 1982, Edited with Introduction by William Peden, Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg, Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, p.146).

<sup>7</sup> “In every government on earth is some trace of human weakness, some germ of corruption and degeneracy, which cunning will discover, and wickedness insensibly open, cultivate and improve.” (from Notes on Virginia, II, 207 cited by Daniel J. Boorstin, 1993, *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson: with a new preface*, The University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London (originally published: New York: H. Holt, 1948, p.178).

<sup>8</sup> John Adams, second president of the United States, and Jefferson’s regular pen-pal in later life, wrote: “Power naturally grows ... because human passions are insatiable. But that power alone can grow which already is too great; that which is unchecked; that which has no equal power to control it.” Cited by Richard Hofstadter (1986) *The American Political Tradition*, 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p.3

<sup>9</sup> A public university established in 1819 and a source of pride for Thomas Jefferson.

far Jefferson strayed from the *status quo* by insisting, for example, on the centrality of the library, not the chapel, in university life.

In the contemporary Anglo-American world, where illiteracy is no longer as widespread as it was in Virginia in the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, formal education has been shown to be a woefully-inadequate bulwark against corruption. It has proven to be a failed brake against the misguided-preoccupations of powerful elites. Boorstin suggests that in democratic societies, especially in the <sup>10</sup>United States:

... there has been a dangerous readiness to transform the principle of majority rule, which is a political necessity, into a philosophical credo; and to confuse the dictates of public opinion with the voice of the individual conscience. The consequence has commonly been a tyranny of public opinion over personal faith and thought. This tyranny has been all the harder for us to perceive simply because it has been so willingly preferred to the travail of individual mind and conscience<sup>11</sup>.

Boorstin's distinction between public opinion and personal conscience is important for the case I wish to build although I would use *public judgement* not *personal conscience* when making that distinction

We make the mistake of thinking nostalgically about great men and events of the past and, in doing so, we miss the contempt with which these men apprehended mere citizens. Naively, we continue to make claims such as this one from an American newspaper columnist:

Perhaps the biggest big idea to gather speed during the last millennium was that we humans might govern ourselves. But no one really meant it.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps we were not reading history closely enough? That idea may have been in the minds of citizens but not in the minds of those designing a system of government. Unusual as the Founding

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<sup>10</sup> The distinction is often made by deliberative democrats between the superficiality of knee-jerk public opinion and the robustness of well-considered public judgement. See, for example, Frances Moore Lappé and Paul Martin Du Bois (1994) *The Quickening of American: Rebuilding our Nation, Remaking our Lives*. I realise that personal conscience and public judgement are different but the latter is reliant on sharing the former and it is through the expression and clash of consciences that judgement is derived.

<sup>11</sup> Boorstin, pp. 111-112.

<sup>12</sup> Anand Giridharadas (2009) " 'Athens' on the Net", *The New York Times*, September 13.

Fathers may have been in crafting documents for which they were not quite ready themselves,<sup>13</sup> and no matter how keen they were to shrug off monarchies and aristocracies, they were not ploughmen or labourers. With very few exceptions they were heirs to fortune and position, as Jefferson was. They were wary of too much democracy. Andrew Hamilton noted how the “vices of democracy” were declaimed out loud at the Constitutional Convention. The lack of faith in citizens found its expression in statements such as this from “a New England clergyman”:

Let it stand as a principle that government originates from the people; but let the people be taught ... that they are not able to govern themselves.<sup>14</sup>

The aim was to curb and confine<sup>15</sup> against the excesses of democracy and people were instead given their allocation of crosses to place on ballot papers, to show consent for superior beings (those with property<sup>16</sup>), who would govern them and protect them from themselves.

We read history through the eyes and ears of great men at our peril. It is difficult not to be inspired by a man like Jefferson who was a talented architect, writer, philosopher, inventor, linguist and aesthete. I, for one, am left in awe of the man<sup>17</sup>. His fine words have become embedded in my mind and won't leave me alone—the notions that (a) rights are sacred and undeniable<sup>18</sup>; (b) that tyranny of our minds is the worst of all possible outcomes<sup>19</sup>; and that (c) the dreams of the future are better

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<sup>13</sup> David Mazzucchelli (2009) states, and I agree with him: “Actually, I’ve always been impressed that the founders were able to craft a document that defined a society they themselves weren’t ready for.” See *Asterios Polyp*, New York: Pantheon Books.

<sup>14</sup> Quotations from Hofstadter, pp. 6-7.

<sup>15</sup> “Cribbing and confining the popular spirit that had been at large since 1776 were essential for the purposes of the new Constitution.” Hofstadter, p. 4. Also, it should be noted that, for the Founding Fathers, “... liberty was linked not to democracy but to property” Hofstadter, p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> John Jay’s maxim: “The People who own the country ought to govern it.” Hofstadter, p.16.

<sup>17</sup> A delightful illustrated blog by Maira Kalman pays homage to Jefferson: <http://kalman.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/25/time-wastes-too-fast/>

<sup>18</sup> The alteration from “sacred & undeniable” to “self-evident” occurred in an early draft of the Declaration of Independence for which Jefferson was the primary draftsman and is thought to be either by Benjamin Franklin’s hand or Thomas Jefferson himself. Julian Boyd favours the latter theory. See Boyd, Julian P., edited by Gerard W. Gawalt (1999) *The Declaration of Independence: the evolution of the text*, revised edition, Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation and the Library of Congress, p. 27.

<sup>19</sup> *Writings*, X, 175, Letter to Dr Benjamin Rush, Monticello, Sep 23, 1800 (in response to opponents “printing lying pamphlets” against Jefferson). The words are etched in the Jefferson Memorial in Washington DC: “I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man”.

than the history of the past<sup>20</sup>. In this paper I want to balance each of those with (a) responsibilities and duties, not just rights; (b) critical analysis as a lost art that can be recovered, and its dependence upon ignorance; and (c) trust in citizens to help formulate a sustainable future .

### **Rights and Responsibilities**

Because of my Australian background, where voting is compulsory<sup>21</sup>, I admit that I may be ingrained with a duty-based sense of governance<sup>22</sup>, as the ancients were. The American system and its founding documents are unquestionably rights-based and found a strong champion in Jefferson<sup>23</sup>. Boorstin claims that Jefferson was less interested or adept at building a government as he was “dogmatically asserting rights and revolutions” thus sidestepping the difficult task of “committing himself to any human pattern of government”.<sup>24</sup>

Rights and revolutions, and railing against oppressors, is a starting point but hardly enough. Consideration must be given to the checks and balances necessary to curb power—whether aristocratic, elite power or that of governments, even if they are elected. The separation of powers built into the American Constitution was one way of achieving this protection<sup>25</sup>. A counterweight is necessary to that “mild despotism” about which de Tocqueville spoke<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> *Writings*, XV, 59, Letter to John Adams, Monticello, Aug 1, 1816.

<sup>21</sup> Australia remains among the few countries that continue a national policy of compulsory voting (resulting in extremely high (> 90%) voter participation rates). We also have a trusted, independent electoral commission with oversight of all elections (local, state and federal). Janette Hartz-Karp & Lyn Carson (2009) “Putting the people into politics: The Australian Citizens’ Parliament”, *International Journal of Public Participation* (IJP2), Vol. 3, No. 1, August.

<sup>22</sup> Gary Hart draws out this distinction between rights-based and duty-based democracies. (2002) *Restoration of the Republic: The Jeffersonian Ideal in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America*, Oxford University Press, p.6

<sup>23</sup> To be fair, Jefferson’s system of wards (five or six miles square)—miniature republics (which never eventuated) was an attempt “to make every citizen an officeholder, thereby instilling a republican sense of duty and responsibility” (Hart, p. 133).

<sup>24</sup> Boorstin, p. 203.

<sup>25</sup> The term ‘separation of powers’ has a different meaning in the Australian context because of the common membership that exists within the executive and legislative branches (Australia borrowed from both Westminster and Washington and is described as a Wash-minster system, i.e. British parliamentary system combined with US federalism).

<sup>26</sup> De Tocqueville, p. 622; also Editors’ Introduction xxviii. Alexis de Tocqueville (2000) *Democracy in America*, Translated, edited and an introduction by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

In my academic world, through experiments with deliberative democracy, this means finding ways to let citizens into the corridors of power, to engage in spirited dialogue, for the purpose of developing recommendations for elected representatives' consideration. These citizens are not the 'usual suspects' or the rabble or mob that Jefferson's contemporaries feared. They participate in mini-publics<sup>27</sup> standing in for the whole, with each citizen having an equal chance of being selected to participate, then engaging in sound techniques to enable genuine deliberation to occur. Without more of this, and unless mini-publics attract the imprimatur of governments, the democratic deficit<sup>28</sup> will surely grow, and audience democracy<sup>29</sup> led by an *elective aristocracy*<sup>30</sup> will prevail.

Representative government<sup>31</sup> may well deteriorate beyond its current malaise as *party democracy* or a *cartel party system*<sup>32</sup>.

Public deliberation, in the form of mini-publics, is not the uncivil full-throated superficial debate of parliaments and congresses or talk-back radio; deliberation is constructive and thoughtful, in-depth and productive. Formal assemblies would do well to emulate it because the results make the effort worthwhile. While debate is concerned with argument, competition, adversarialism, coercion and

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<sup>27</sup> This term is used by Archon Fung (2003, p. 339), borrowing from the term of Robert Dahl (1985, p.88) "minipopulus" or minipopulation" (cited by Hartz-Karp & Carson). John Gastil describes these sort of deliberative public engagements as "an official or quasi-official process whereby policymakers, policy/scientific experts, and lay citizens work together on a public problem or concern, with the citizens carefully examining a problem and seeking a well-reasoned solution through a period of informed, inclusive, and respectful consideration of diverse points of view" (Pers. Comm., adapted from John Gastil, 2008, *Political Communication and Deliberation*, Thousand Okas, CA: Sage).

<sup>28</sup> The phrase "democratic deficit" was coined in 1986 by Bill Newton Dunn, a British Member of the European Parliament. It refers to the failure of the system of government and its actors to meet public expectations of integrity and legitimacy in line with democratic ideals.

<sup>29</sup> Bernard Manin (1997) uses this term in *The Principles of Representative Government*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, to describe the passive nature of contemporary democracy.

<sup>30</sup> Jefferson himself spoke of *elective despotism* (see Hofstadter, p. 29).

<sup>31</sup> The terms 'republic', 'republican democracy' and 'representative government' are used interchangeably in this document. Madison, in Federalist 10 distinguishes between a democracy and a republic. The former is popular or direct democracy with people ruling themselves. This was considered inappropriate for a large, heterogeneous country. A republic, in contrast, is representative and, therefore, indirect. Andrew Hamilton, James Madison, James and John Jay (1961) *The Federalist Papers*, Introduction by Clinton Rossiter, New York and Toronto: The New American Library. See also Editors' Introduction in de Tocqueville, p. xxvii.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair (1995) "Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party, *Party Politics*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 5-28. Madison (in *Federalist Papers*) and his contemporaries (including Jefferson) condemned political parties as evil—factions that would detract from the more important association, i.e. a republic that would transcend factions (see for example Bruce Ackerman, 2005, *The Failure of the Founding Fathers*, Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, p.5 and p.18)

the need to win, deliberation is replete with uncovering assumptions, weighing options, making choices, seeking overlap and common ground<sup>33</sup>. Jefferson stated that differences of opinion lead to inquiry and inquiry to truth<sup>34</sup>. Public deliberation creates a means to achieve this, and provides a neat overlap between public order and personal concerns<sup>35</sup>. To me, deliberation is the missing link. It overcomes the difficulties that concerned radical thinkers such as Jefferson<sup>36</sup>. It retains legitimacy in the executive, legislature and judiciary as it strengthens *consent* while honouring the contributions of individuals.

Deliberation could be encompassed in what John Keane suggests is our current experience of *monitory* democracy, where procedures are enacted to keep the elected representatives and the unelected administration honest. Even Mr Jefferson would probably approve of this.<sup>37</sup>.

### **Critical Analysis and Ignorance**

Who can argue against the value of formal education, especially basic skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic? There is considerable worth in primary, secondary and tertiary education, in undergraduate and postgraduate learning. I, for one, have also revelled in the (informal) lifelong learning that preceded and followed that education and have certainly learned more *beyond* educational institutions than within them as an enrolled student. People learn without even realising they are learning. Consequently, they have the capacity to bring a wealth of experience and knowledge into the public sphere. Dr Benjamin Rush, one of Jefferson's enduring friends, noted:

The common people do not despise scholars, because they know more, but because they know less than themselves... Men are generally most proud of those things that do not

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<sup>33</sup> Jefferson was wary of uniformity and asked: "But is uniformity of opinion desirable? No more than face and stature." (from Notes on Virginia, Query XVII, quoted by Boorstin, p.126). He saw uniformity as derived from coercion. This would be anathema to deliberative democrats.

<sup>34</sup> Boorstin, p. 126.

<sup>35</sup> Jefferson stated in his First Inaugural Address (Washington DC 1801) that the strongest Government arose when every man "... would fly to the standard of the law, and would meet invasions of the public order as his own personal concerns."

<sup>36</sup> Jefferson, it should be noted, had a " ... deep suspicion of entrenched classes with fixed privileges; a steady faith in the educability of ordinary people, without which a reliance upon the 'will of the people' becomes impossible; a profound belief in tolerance as the social attitude necessary for the settlement of public differences and conflicts". Adrienne Koch (1957) *The Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson*, Peter Smith: Gloucester, Mass., p. 22.

<sup>37</sup> John Keane (2009) *The Life and Death of Democracy*, Simon & Schuster.



contribute to the happiness of themselves, or others. Useful knowledge generally humbles the mind, but learning like fine clothes, feeds pride, and thereby hardens the human heart.<sup>38</sup>

The insistence upon formal education as a pre-requisite for citizens' political competency persisted despite this belief and continues today. In experiments with public deliberation it is the most-oft heard comment (other than that people are *too busy* to deliberate<sup>39</sup>), i.e. that citizens are not capable or sufficiently well-informed to deliberate properly. That's true. They are not when they *arrive* at a deliberative event. At that stage they are often uninformed. However this is not because they are stupid, it is because they have made a choice and that choice is quite rational. Their situation could be described as rational ignorance

I would argue that *rational ignorance* should be privileged over *informed popular debate* as a pathway to a vibrant, democratic, civic culture—at least ignorance as the *first* stage of public deliberation.

Rational ignorance is a term devised by political economist, Anthony Downs in the 1950s and involves weighing up the cost and benefit of acquiring knowledge relative to the time and effort involved in doing so. We simply don't need to know everything about everything because it's not going to make that much difference anyway. As Fishkin asks<sup>40</sup> :

If I have but one vote or opinion out of millions, why should I spend a lot of time and effort becoming informed about complex policy questions? My individual vote or opinion will not make much difference. And most of us have more urgent demands on our time and attention. The public's well-documented low levels of information might be regrettable to democratic theorists, but they are understandable given the incentives facing any individual citizen.

Politicians say that they want to hear lively public debate in which *all* citizens participate. Historians, too, teach us to “think historically” using evidence and procedures for querying that evidence<sup>41</sup>. This focus is not on the accumulation of knowledge by citizens but a belief that certain intellectual tools

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<sup>38</sup> Cited by Boorstin, p.222.

<sup>39</sup> Because mini-publics are usually one-off, with people coming together to deliberate deeply over a few days, they don't require the commitment necessary for elected office or membership of a standing committee or working paper.

<sup>40</sup> James S. Fishkin (2006) “The Nation in a Room: Turning public opinion into policy”, *Boston Review*, March/April <http://bostonreview.net/BR31.2/fishkin.html>

<sup>41</sup> According to British historian, Professor John Tosh, on ABC Radio National, *Hindsight* program, 17 Aug 2008 ABC Radio National.

are necessary. For example, Tosh speaks of the need to know “the right questions to ask”. The problem, again, is that this responsibility is most often placed at the feet of *all* citizens. I question the necessity for that.

Tosh notes how important it is for citizens to become “masters of judgement” rather than “masters of facts” along with a capacity to weigh up arguments and cases<sup>42</sup>. His tendency to favour the acquisition of process skills over factual knowledge makes sense. However, I would still want to insist that everyone doesn’t need to acquire those skills *per se*. Citizens just need to acquire them when brought into any sort of deliberative space and, indeed, this will be the best time to do so—especially if the particular public deliberation is likely to have influence or impact. Adult learning principles have shown us that nothing propels us to learn more than an extremely *relevant* learning experience.

Public deliberation is *not* a suggestions box, a public hearing, an opinion poll, a committee or a referendum. It’s not like the petitions that were submitted to the Virginia Conventions<sup>43</sup>. It involves group deliberation—usually at a one-off event but not always—and the consideration of options by weighing up their strengths and weaknesses in order to offer recommendations. As a journalist recently noted<sup>44</sup>:

If you pick an average Joe off the street, stick a television camera in his face, and ask, “So what do you think we should do to improve the economy”? you are likely to get, at best, a simplistic answer like, “Create more jobs.” However, if you ask the same individual to come to a several-hour-long dialogue session where time is taken to explain the core challenges and the basic approaches to fostering a strong economy and tell him that he will be able to offer his own input on how leaders should address the issues, a number of things happen. One, in a surprising number of cases, the citizen actually volunteers his day to contribute to the process. Two, he has a good time interacting with citizens of diverse perspectives, learning about the issues and talking about the possible policy solutions from his own perspective. Three, he

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<sup>42</sup> Responding to questions during the aforementioned forum which was broadcast on ABC Radio National.

<sup>43</sup> McDonnell notes that “... petitioners felt completely bereft of proper political representation” (p. 230). “Starting with the Fifth Virginia Convention, then, freeholders increasingly asserted themselves through petitions.” (p. 231) Michael A. McDonnell (2007) *The Politics of War. Race, class and conflict in revolutionary Virginia*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press

<sup>44</sup> Michael Hamill Remaley (2008) “Fifteen things every journalist should know about public engagement”, *National Civic Review*, vol 97, no 2, Summer, pp. 45-51

actually shares ideas that are coherent, thoughtful, and enlightening to leaders. The person isn't transformed (public engagement isn't magic), but the dynamic of our politics is changed.

Public deliberation involves accelerated learning and the pursuit of common ground without the requirement for unanimity or full consensus. The method for selecting participants is paramount. It's easy to find the squeaky wheels or delegates from interest groups. What's more difficult is attracting the voiceless, those whose voices are rarely heard. Public deliberation usually involves people who are typically not aligned with an interest group or already active in the political arena. To achieve this diversity of input, stratified random selection is often used, and invitations are issued or other methods, such as snowball sampling<sup>45</sup> are employed that will deliver a microcosm of the larger population. In Jeffersonian terms this is as likely to attract a ploughman as a professor.<sup>46</sup>

If a cross-section of a population is brought together there will inevitably be varying levels of education, knowledge and experience. This means that many people will not know a great deal about the topic under discussion. Though this may seem counter-intuitive such a situation is seen as an ideal starting point. If we know a great deal about something the following happens: (1) we close our minds to alternative pathways, (2) we share our knowledge with people who support our opinion and this, in turn, limits our thinking, (3) our creativity is constricted because we think we know what's possible, and dismiss anything which sounds unrealistic<sup>47</sup>. Events like the Australian prime minister's 2020 Summit are examples of this, when the "best and the brightest" were brought together to think of big ideas. Instead, intellectual and political elites defaulted to the known ideas they had been formulating for years and sought familiar ways of garnering support for those ideas: bargaining, caucusing and so on.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Snowball sampling is employed in research as a way to find information-rich key informants. The researcher starts with only a few respondents then asks who else has the characteristics that are needed. This method can also be used to attract missing voices into a deliberative space.

<sup>46</sup> In a letter to Peter Carr: "State a moral case to a ploughman and a professor. The former will decide it as well, and often better than the latter, because he has not been led astray by artificial rules." (Boorstin, p. 141).

<sup>47</sup> Muhammad Yunus insisted that the most powerful attribute he brought to the establishment of Grameen Bank was knowing *nothing* about banking. While writing this paper I attended a lecture at the University of Virginia (the university founded by Jefferson) by Muhammad Yunus (founder of the Grameen Bank, originally in Bangladesh, now worldwide). Grameen Bank lends only to the poor and usually to women with extraordinary success and with almost no defaults on loans

<sup>48</sup> I wrote more about this in 2008: "2020 Summit: Meetings in the Foothills", *Australian Review of Public Affairs*, May, <http://www.australianreview.net/digest/2008/04/carson.html>

A neutral, skilled moderator is important for these deliberations, to ensure that the group can find its own way to achieve its own goals. George Mason found it difficult to *control* a “very large committee” at the Fifth Virginia Convention, one that was described as “overcharged with useless Members.”<sup>49</sup> A skilled moderator could have handled that crowd and ensured that those members were not so useless after all. This is not about *controlling* a group; it is a way to allow the group to make its own choices. It should be added that there is no need to recoil from contentious debate<sup>50</sup> because a skilled moderator can probe and encourage participants to extend their thinking, asking: Why do you believe this to be true? Can you explain your position further?<sup>51</sup>

Public deliberations run for varying lengths of time: one day to five days would be usual. They involve a great deal of learning—from fellow participants, from written materials and audio-visual resources and guest speakers. Therefore, in contrast to the aforementioned 2020 Summit, a diverse group of people approaches the activity differently. They will have formed opinions from mixing with like-minded people—as we all do. We have narrow sources of information: our friends, family, colleagues and the same media sources day after day. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Siemens, for one, locates knowledge—“not just in our heads but in networks”<sup>52</sup>. Downes argues that knowledge is distributed and uses examples such as this one: *Who knows how to make a 747 fly from London to Toronto?*

The short answer is that *nobody* knows how to do this – no one person could design a 747, manufacture the parts (including tires and aircraft engines), take it off, fly it properly, tend to the passengers, navigate, and land it successfully. The knowledge is *distributed* across a network of people, and the phenomenon of ‘flying a 747’ can exist at all only because of the connections between the constituent members of that network.

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<sup>49</sup> McDonnell, p. 234.

<sup>50</sup> “[Jefferson] recoiled from debate and contention, once confessing his ‘love of silence and quiet’ and ‘abhorrence of dispute’”, John Ferling (2004) *Adams vs. Jefferson*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, p. 24.

<sup>51</sup> Sandy Heierbacher, 2009, “Upgrading the Way We Do Politics”, Accessed via [www.thataway.org](http://www.thataway.org)

<sup>52</sup> Cited by Stephen Downes (2006) “Learning Networks and Connective Knowledge”, October 16, <http://it.coe.uga.edu/itforum/paper92/paper92.html>

This distributed network is dependent on diverse sources of knowledge and a situation which enables these sources of knowledge to connect. Importantly for Siemens, the “capacity to know more is more critical than what is currently known”<sup>53</sup>.

Public deliberations enable this kind of “connectivism” by expanding the range of knowledge or information sources and bringing together available evidence. Participants are also alerted to the ways in which we hear and interpret expert knowledge<sup>54</sup>, the lens through which each person views his or her world, and the power of collective wisdom when a diverse group of people gathers to deliberate. While not everyone in the group can be the most articulate or encyclopaedic, each brings stories and observations that others can help integrate into their growing tapestry of understanding. It is surprising how differently an issue can be viewed and how creatively and intelligently it can be resolved when a group is clear about its goals, has power over the direction it wishes to take, has access to sufficient information and an opportunity to thread it all together in a meaningful and inclusive way.

To reiterate, this is the important point: public deliberations do not depend on a fully-informed, highly knowledgeable group of people *as the starting point*. Ignorance is an acceptable condition with which to begin<sup>55</sup>. Mini-publics depend on open minds, skilful questioning, deep listening and learning, close analysis and a tendency toward exploring common ground. By the end, the group is competent to decide. Those who practise deliberative democracy through public deliberations are increasingly of the view that a combination of the smart and not so smart is the perfect starting point for fruitful discussion<sup>56</sup>, with participant confidence building through the deliberative process. The potential of public deliberation was unknown to Jefferson.

### **Formulate a sustainable future**

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<sup>53</sup> Cited by Downes.

<sup>54</sup> There are usually expert speakers invited to address mini-publics. Sometimes these experts are selected by an independent steering committee, at other times, by participants themselves.

<sup>55</sup> In a letter to Charles Yancey from Monticello, January 6, 1816, Jefferson stated: “If a nation expects to be ignorant & free, it expects what never was & never will be.” See Kaminski, pp. 342-3.

<sup>56</sup> See Hartz-Karp & Carson; also James Surowiecki (2004) *Wisdom of Crowds*, Doubleday.

Jefferson said: I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past<sup>57</sup>. He also spoke passionately about the need for generational change<sup>58</sup> and the importance of shrugging off outmoded ancestral cloaks.

I am not an advocate for frequent changes in laws and constitutions but laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind and that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made. New truths discovered and manners and opinions change. With the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times. We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy as civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors.

It is entirely possible that we would rather be ruined than change<sup>59</sup> but I hope not. Jefferson believed in citizens more than most<sup>60</sup>, yet he seemed only to be able to believe in their capacity for (1) regular uprising should things turn sour<sup>61</sup> or (2) choosing between candidate A or candidate B. Given that Jefferson saw government not so much as “the expression of a political theory, but the largely unreflective answer of healthy men to the threat of tyranny<sup>62</sup>” and, therefore, expressed as

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<sup>57</sup> *Writings*, XV, 59, Letter to John Adams, Monticello, Aug 1, 1816.

<sup>58</sup> Jefferson believed that “one generation of men cannot foreclose or burden its use on another” (quoted by Boorstin p.206) and Thomas Paine, one of the Jeffersonian circle, stated “[e]very age and generation must be as free to act for itself, *in all cases*, as the ages and generations which preceded it.” (Paine, 1791, in Mark Philp, ed., 1995, *Thomas Paine. Rights of Man, Common Sense, and Other Political Writings*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 92-93). Jefferson famously said “the earth belongs... to the living”. *Writings*, VII, 455: Letter to Madison, Paris, September 6, 1789.

<sup>59</sup> W.H. Auden wrote: “We would rather be ruined than change, We would rather die in our dread than climb the cross of the moment, And let our illusions die.”

<sup>60</sup> Speaking of the Fifth Virginia Convention, Michael McDonnell notes: “Jefferson’s plan, of all the written proposals extant, shows the influence of the people out-of-doors most directly... His plan also put more power into the hands of the people than all the other plans.” (McDonnell, pp.231-232)

<sup>61</sup> Jefferson observed again and again (according to Boorstin, p.174) “*man was the only animal which levied war against its kind*” and that the Creator had “ordained the human species to be eternally and systematically engaged in its own decimation” to avoid over-population (Boorstin, p,175). He wrote, too, in a letter to Colonel Smith, “What signify a few lives lost in a century or two? The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time, with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure.” (*Writings*, VI, 373: Nov. 13, 1787, Paris, Nov 13, 1787) Alarminglly, this last quote was invoked by a pistol-toting chap at a recent public meeting in New Hampshire, convened to discuss healthcare reform. Rick Perslstein, 2009, “In America Crazy is a Preexisting Condition. Birthers, Town Hall Hecklers and the Return of Right-Wing Rage”, *The Washington Post*, August 16

<sup>62</sup> Boorstin, p. 237.

reaction, we can only await a response to the current inadequacies of Western governments. Indeed the deliberative turn<sup>63</sup> may be that reaction.

Along with other deliberative democrats, I contend that citizens possess considerable and undervalued capacities for decision making and self-governance, capacities that Jefferson equated with only the most educated. Perhaps it is those capacities which can rescue us from some serious crises: the earth is warming up because of too much pollution; the climate is changing and hurricanes, fires, floods and dust storms<sup>64</sup> are becoming more frequent; Jefferson's worst fears about commerce and debt and banks have been realised<sup>65</sup> and national economies throughout the world have become interdependently vulnerable; zealots, acting like automatons, are exploding bombs in hotels and train stations; and people cannot access health care or nutritious food. As Jefferson anticipated, the elected representatives have become wolves with an eye on the next election<sup>66</sup>, not the planet in 50 years; they appear not to be up to the job and citizens no longer trust them<sup>67</sup>.

President Barack Obama in an address to Congress stated that when:

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<sup>63</sup> The term "deliberative turn" was coined by John Dryzek. He was speaking about the shift in thinking (circa 1990) whereby democratic legitimacy is derived from authentic deliberation among those affected by a decision. See, for example, John S. Dryzek (2002) *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations*.

<sup>64</sup> While writing this paper (September 2009) an unprecedented dust storm hit the east coast of Australia turning Sydney, and elsewhere, red.

<sup>65</sup> Jefferson considered that "no generation had a right to contract a public debt which could not be retired within nineteen years" (Boorstin, p. 208). Debt in the United States is now measured in trillions of dollars.

<sup>66</sup> Jefferson wrote from Paris in 1787 that European nations, under pretence of governing, were divided into wolves and sheep. He advised: "Cherish, therefore, the spirit of our people, and keep alive their attention. Do not be too severe upon their errors, but reclaim them by enlightening them. If once they become inattentive to the public affairs, you and I, and Congress and Assemblies, Judges and Governors, shall all become wolves." (Letter to Edward Carrington Jan 16, 1787, quoted by Boorstin p. 177). Jefferson "... aimed to devise a government too weak to aid wolves, and yet strong enough to protect the sheep" (Boorstin 190).

<sup>67</sup> A recent survey conducted by the National Conference on Citizenship, "America's Civic Health Index 2009: Civic Health in Hard Times" shows low levels of trust in Congress (6%) and the Executive Branch (also 6%). This from a nationally representative sample of 1,518 Americans and additional oversamples of 2,371 respondents in six states (p.1). Of additional interest, 71% of those sampled favoured a national deliberation involving more than one million Americans in a national discussion of an important issue and requiring Congress to respond to what citizens say (p.15).

... we can no longer even engage in a civil conversation with each other over the things that truly matter, we don't merely lose our capacity to solve big challenges, we los[e] something essential about ourselves<sup>68</sup>.

It's possible to build a culture of civil conversation by routinely convening mini-publics—not simply to chat but to have conversations that matter, leading to public judgement about important decisions. To return to my point, this doesn't require educating an *entire* population or improving *everyone's* skills set. It means that small groups of people, as needed, will become informed about a complex matter and develop the listening, questioning and analysing skills necessary to consider options and make difficult choices. Jefferson was not alone as someone with an insatiable curiosity<sup>69</sup>. Lifelong learners abound but are rarely asked to learn and be involved in political decision making. The wider population will become more comfortable with citizens' abilities to do so once we develop confidence in the robustness of mini-publics. Hopefully, this means that all rationally ignorant citizens will then be prepared to take their turn to practise random acts of citizenship through public deliberation.

To return to Keane's description of current democracy as monitory, a few writers go further than that and speculate about a democracy that is more than monitoring. Their models give real power to the people by creating permanent citizens' assemblies<sup>70</sup> and, thereby, integrate aspects of Ancient Athenian democracy. Jefferson followed de Tracy's lead in condemning assembly democracy, arguing that it degenerates quickly into despotism and that it is not workable anywhere larger than a

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<sup>68</sup> Cited by Dana Milbank, 2009, "Washington Sketch: Republicans Behaving Badly", in *The Washington Post*, 9 September, A2.

<sup>69</sup> Jefferson wrote in *Notes on Virginia*: "A patient pursuit of facts, and cautious combination and comparison of them, is the drudgery to which man is subjected by his Maker, if he wishes to attain sure knowledge." (Boorstin p.130)

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, Ethan J. Leib, 2004, *Deliberative Democracy in America: A Proposal for a Popular Branch of Government*, Penn State University Press; and Ernest Callenbach and Michael Phillips, 1985, *Citizen Legislature*, Accessed online via <http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC11/Calnbach.htm> 20 September 2009



city state<sup>71</sup>. The former is not accurate and the latter challenge of scale can be met in the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>72</sup>.

I think of mini-publics similarly, as a way to devolve power in order to strengthen democracy, rather than a means merely to monitor elites. Mini-publics produce an actively engaged form of democracy without the weakness of majoritarianism which lacks opportunities to puzzle the agenda. I admit that those who indulge in speculations about reforming rigid political systems have vivid imaginations and considerable optimism. Most of the experiments I've been involved in<sup>73</sup> have met resistance from elected representatives and have not had a great deal of *influence*. There are exceptions that indicate that much more *is* possible. Occasionally an elected representative has been willing to share decision-making power but this remains the exception, not the rule.

I think there are three ideals for deliberative democracy. One of them, *influence*, is the hardest to achieve, but the other two are already achievable, those two being *representativeness* and *deliberative capacity*. We can attract a diverse group of citizens to a public deliberation and we can be confident of their collective ability to think well and deeply about important matters. Might there be a future in which a vibrant citizenry is in respectful relationship with those appointed to govern? Astute, far-sighted decision making is essential in order to tackle the extraordinary challenges we now face and this combination may well provide the ingredients necessary for doing so.

Is it possible that America's Founding Fathers were wrong in their shared belief that democracy is only ever a transitional stage of government, evolving always into either tyranny or aristocracy?<sup>74</sup> Perhaps the republican model is incomplete. What if it merely lacks a sufficiently strong framework,

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<sup>71</sup> Jefferson, according to Koch, was deeply influenced by Destutt de Tracy's *Commentary and Review of Montesquieu* and their language is similar in relation to representative government. For example, in a letter to Dupont de Nemours in 1816 Jefferson observes: "We think experience has proved it safer, for the mass of individuals composing the society, to reserve to themselves personally the exercise of all rightful powers to which they are competent, and to delegate those to which they are not competent to deputies named..." (Koch, p. 153). Athenian, or 'simple democracy' was seen by de Tracy as the "infancy of state", and aristocracies rather than pure democracies. Koch (p.156) notes Jefferson's similar description.

<sup>72</sup> Civic Evolution [url] moderated a national online parliament which was convened prior to the face-to-face Australian Citizens' Parliament [url]. Global deliberations are also possible—note the World Wide Views on Global Warming project which synchronised deliberative activities in 38 countries simultaneously [url].

<sup>73</sup> These experiments include the following methods: Citizens' Jury, World Cafe, Consensus Conference, Televote, Deliberative Poll, Citizens' Parliament and more. See [www.activedemocracy.net](http://www.activedemocracy.net) for details. The Deliberative Poll, slightly misnamed, and the World Cafe are the least deliberative of that group although useful for other reasons.

<sup>74</sup> Hofstadter, p. 13 where he also cites John Adams in a letter to John Taylor: "... democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself."

one erected by people on their own behalf, with continual consent, and therefore its legitimacy, enhanced through mini-publics, ensuring that it remains strong? To achieve this, we need to take seriously the duties of citizens, not just their rights; we would also have to accept rational ignorance (an impermanent condition), as a legitimate starting point for in-depth public deliberation; and most importantly we would need to trust these citizens to help formulate options for a sustainable, inclusive future.

Mr Jefferson meant well in his patrician approach to the common people. But his trust only extended as far as his elite inner circle:

To you, then, gentlemen, who are charged with the sovereign functions of legislation, and to those associated with you, I look with encouragement for that guidance and support which may enable us to steer with safety the vessel in which we are all embarked, amidst the conflicting elements of a troubled world.<sup>75</sup>

Perhaps the time will come when the incorrect stereotype attributed to citizens—as incompetent or incapable decision makers—can no longer be wielded by political elites as an excuse to deny a most basic human right: equal opportunity for citizens to significantly influence their own destiny.

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<sup>75</sup> Jefferson's First Inauguration Address, 4 March, 1801

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