

ALTIUS CONFERENCE: OXFORD

The Future of Democracy

POLITICAL REFORM

I work in a family company involved in urban infrastructure. I'm no political science student and, up until relatively recently, have had no real interest in politics. My main interaction with politicians was through the regular rounds of party political campaign lunches and dinners. I was a regular invitee, as a businessman/potential donor.

I found that much of what was being said at these lunches and dinners sounded much the same. The politicians aimed to impress their audience with their credentials as good economic and political managers.

To be fair, for the most part, the politicians were well meaning, but they struck me more as Salesman than Statesman. Their standard rebuff to my cynicism was as per Churchill's: 'Democracy is the worst form of government, apart from all those that have been tried before'.

I took that rebuff as a challenge, which also meant proposing some alternative, as that's ultimately what people want to see.

An 'Existential Crisis' is how the Economist magazine describes the current state of democracy in the UK. I think that diagnosis can be extended to most western democracies. We all know the general symptoms: low voter turnouts, declining party memberships, increasing distrust of political institutions and politicians. But what are the causes of the illness? I think one underlying dynamic has to do with what Moises Naim defines as 'The End of Power'. Power is so diffuse, particularly now with the internet and rising education levels.

'Here Comes Everybody' as Clay Shirkey says. The great attraction of our cities and societies is that they are salad bowls of diversity. That's fantastic, and as we want it. However with this diversity comes many different viewpoints, and the more broadly based, clear-cut, ideological constituencies are making way for tribal groupings. In this fragmented political landscape, partisan interests try hard to impress.

The media relish this circus: a circus of competition for relevance and power, of continuous campaigning, peppered with rhetoric and hyperbole. All this makes for great theatre (and actors), but it makes government much more difficult, with tribal tensions dominating the civic dialogue, leaving no room for common ground.

So I started talking to some like-minded friends about how things might be improved and what might be the alternatives. I was fortunate that some respected ex Senators, State Premiers, Mayors and academics sought fit to join the journey and we became The newDemocracy Foundation – a political research and advocacy group.

Australia has a good track record in political reform. We were the first to legislate for the secret ballot in 1856, and one of the first to introduce the vote for women. And deliberative democracy, one of the most important developments in recent political theory and practice, has a solid base of academics and practitioners in Australia. The work of Professors Lyn Carson and John Drysek became the inspiration for us, and me in particular.

We are, however, alive to the innately conservative nature of what we are dealing with. Government is too important to be treated lightly. And the existing political actors, including the electorate at large, have invested heavily in the existing agonistic framework: a framework universally acknowledged to be ‘..the worst, apart from all those others tried before’!

CITIZENS’ PARLIAMENT PROJECT

In 2009, we embarked on our big Research Project: Australia’s First Citizens’ Parliament, modelled on the Canada’s Citizens’ Assembly experience. In our case, 150 Australians were randomly selected and convened, all expenses paid, to discuss how Australia’s system of Government could be improved. It was a big project, involving over 100 organisers and volunteer facilitators: equally funded by a Federal Government Research Grant and The newDemocracy Foundation.

We wanted to know how the public might consider improving our system of government.

8000 invitations to participate were sent out across the country to addressees selected at random in each of the Federal electorates, with 3000 responses received in return. Of those 3000, 150 were selected, at random again, to constitute the final Jury. The citizens firstly met a few times in regional areas and then discussed on-line and finally convened at Canberra’s old Parliament House for 4 days of facilitated deliberation. Here’s a short video of that project:

This project revealed two things to me: that ordinary people, when they come together to deliberate in the right forum, are extraordinary: they are tolerant and intelligent. The second thing is that there is an untapped desire in each and every one of us to be involved in politics. Empowering people to participate in politics was a consistent theme. People want to be in charge of their destinies. It’s as Aristotle said, ‘People are political animals’. People need people; we want to relate to each other; we want to play and work together and we want to have a say in all of this and how it might be organised.

CITIZEN JURIES

Since that first project, we have been involved in some six of these Citizens’ Juries, for local and State governments, across Australia. Last week I was down in Melbourne with my wife and daughter to assist in launching the first Citizens’ Jury there for that City. It’s an

ambitious project where the City is asking a People's Panel (as they're calling it) to deliberate on the city's \$4bn spend over the next ten years.

In 2012, the Premier of South Australia asked us to convene a Citizens' Jury to discuss the Government's concern with the CBD nightlife culture. (We were then asked to do a similar one for Sydney last year). Here's a short video clip of the Adelaide process.

There are general criticisms of the institution of the Jury itself. These criticisms revolve around two basic contentions: firstly that Juries are inexpert and tend to the lowest common denominator, and secondly Juries get swayed by dominant Jurors. Most of the evidence, and our direct experience with Juries, does not accord with these contentions. The actual judicial evidence in Australia suggests Jury decisions are invariably supported by the case Judges.

Jim Spigelman, one of the Chief Justices in Australia, defines the Jury as 'a profoundly ...egalitarian institution'. He goes on to say: 'Selection by lot has two distinct advantages: Firstly, it operates on the principle that all persons to be selected are fundamentally equal. Secondly, selection by lot prevents corruption of the system.'

There is also a body of research highlighting that diversity, rather than narrow expertise, is the particular strength of the Jury, imparting the institution with multifarious, collective intelligence.

HISTORY OF DEMOCRACY

[UK PARLIAMENT foto]

We keep asking ourselves - and others - what is democracy?

Here's the so-called mother of all Parliaments. Seen here speaking is William Pitt the Junior, as Prime Minister, addressing the House of Commons in 1785. At the same time, Jefferson called his Congress a 'natural aristocracy', because there were no titled gentry. Nevertheless, like its British cousin, it was comprised exclusively of rich white men. The term Democracy was shunned as it referred to the Greek model, based on the jury, which included both rich and poor, with virtually no election contests.

In choosing to model their Republic on the British one, the Americans thereby consigned the original model to history. To add insult to injury, today everyone has appropriated the word for themselves, further entrenching the misunderstanding of what democracy means.

[BOULE foto]

in 508 BC, when the Athenians brought to an end centuries of tyrannical bloodshed, they invented the most inclusive form of government.

Supreme authority was placed in the hands of the people, by random selection.

The ruling body of Athens became The Council of 500, selected from an annual, random draw of male citizens: rich and poor. The Council drafted the laws, which were then put for ratification, or amendment, to The Assembly, which gathered in a large, open-air field, accommodating some 6 to 10 thousand people.

But it was The Council, the Jury, that determined the Laws

As I mentioned at the start, whenever a discussion begins around political reform, people want to hear and consider alternatives.

Let's, in conclusion, consider one example: a proposal from Professor Zacaras at the University of Vermont. Called a Citizens' Senate, it's an Upper House comprised of randomly selected citizens, rotated periodically every two to three years. It would operate very much like a National Service.

Can you imagine what sort of dynamic that would introduce into the current political system - having a group of citizens sitting above the directly elected representatives?

It's just one of a number of models and case studies which have the potential, we think, to liberate our democracies from the tyranny of partisan interests. Whatever the alternatives are, our approach is simple: let a citizens' jury decide which ones they want to trial for themselves.

May I then leave you with this thought about the future of our democracies.

In this crowded and complex world we need more effective ways to reconcile our differences: the advantaged societies are likely to be those reaching agreements made and advocated by the broadest spectrum of everyday people.

Luca Belgiorno-Nettis

The newDemocracy Foundation

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