

The Democracy of Citizenship

Today's general idea of the meaning of democracy as a practical way of sharing power within a society has to be viewed within the context of just where the power bases lie from an evolutionary social point of view.

Just as life forms and ecosystems evolve (and can be given new directions by disruptive events, such as significant random mutations, catastrophic natural events or changes in environmental conditions), societies evolve too, based on developments in knowledge (in many areas, such as scientific understanding, medicine, technology, political and philosophical analysis, etc.) and natural progression in social and cultural sophistication brought about by the introduction and embedding of new ideas which are perceived to add value to the lives of its members, in particular those who are in a position to benefit more significantly.

Democracy as a concept, fits into this area of ideas which have resulted in cultural evolution or progression. However it is important to recognise that the implementation of democracy in a practical sense in the present day, reflects only a single point in its evolution, and that looking historically, the natural development of power structures and bases within the culture of human society (as a social primate) where hierarchies, particularly male, define where power resides, is in conflict with the notion of sharing power equally amongst all members of the society. It has been clearly apparent that the birth and development of the democratic concept in practice, has been resisted by those who have benefited from the natural power structures of a hierarchical, generally male-dominated, primate culture. Left to its own devices, the further evolution of democracy within the current culture will undoubtedly be greatly hampered by those who would resist any political challenge to their embedded cultural power bases. The passing of power from one generation to the next in the manner of preserving this power within the hands of the same set of people, albeit separated generationally, results in both a rigidity and inflexibility in hierarchical structures, and a lock-out for the rest of the members of the society, greatly undermining their ability to achieve everything they are capable of achieving, limiting mobility generally, and inhibiting societal and cultural development, simply for the personal benefit of those towards the top of the hierarchy.

In order to free democracy to be developed and implemented to its broadest level (given current knowledge and thinking) this rigid hierarchy must be challenged so as to remove, or minimise, its ability to prevent and resist progress in this area. In order to do this, it is necessary to paint a picture of what changes could be made to how the system operates and how power can be shared, in order to create a much more flexible, dynamic and accessible social and political culture, based on advanced democratic concepts, such as egalitarianism, pluralism and empowered citizenship. Below, I intend to outline, at least one set of ideas as to what these changes might be.

The first area to address for democratic advancement is that of ensuring a 'fair' distribution of power amongst citizens (given the idea outlined in a previous essay – The Externalisation of Change – of empowered citizenship). This can be reflected in the notion that the power which each citizen holds in their hands, is a permanent possession and that representatives elected by citizens are merely given the right to 'touch' this power (as a connection) for the term of the parliament within which they operate. The power remains at all times in the possession of the citizen. In order for this concept to function in practice, where each citizen's power is of equal weight, the only effective electoral system which can be implemented is proportional representation. There are of course a number of different definitions of this type of system, but current thinking in objective circles points to the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system as the fairest and most equitable concept. This is, as always, up for debate, but if vested interests are to be dissuaded from

undermining objective thinking, priority needs to be given to those who can divorce themselves from representing directions of travel which do not rest on purely open principle.

If an electoral system is perceived to be good enough for electing representatives of one body or chamber, it is appropriate that it be employed for all bodies or chambers at all levels (national, regional and local). There need be no divergence. It keeps everything simple and easy to understand for all citizens across the board. It is also the responsibility of an empowered citizen to vote at every opportunity, and from an informed standpoint. An ongoing interest in all aspects of citizenship is vital to ensure that each citizen is always ready to vote and does not need to ‘cram’ information just prior to an election. Because it is a responsibility then it follows that voting should be compulsory, as it is in Australia, with relevant and appropriate incentives and sanctions (perhaps financial, through the tax system) to encourage full participation. Once empowered citizenship is embedded as a cultural norm, these encouragement, in theory, should become redundant.

At a national level, it is current thinking that a two-chamber parliamentary system is appropriate and necessary, to maintain effective checks and balances, ensuring proper scrutiny. Both chambers should be elected using PR; however the method for each (in this specific case) may be different. For example, the second chamber is most effectively defined as a scrutinising chamber, and here a nation may wish to have representatives who have more ‘life’ and ‘system’ experience to allow more effective scrutiny, and therefore a list-based electoral model may be more appropriate. This would allow political organisations to nominate lists of potential representatives who had great experience in a diversity of areas to be elected to scrutinize the work of the primary executive chamber and pass comment and make recommendations. There are obvious benefits here, but on the downside, this list-based system could be seen to promote some degree of political incest and cronyism, with the danger of a circular ‘locked-in’, jobs-for-the-boys culture, which perpetuates an inflexibility and keeps power in the hands of those who are supposed to only have limited connection to it from the hands of empowered citizens. It also locks out independent representatives who do not ‘belong’ to a political organisation and therefore are not ‘controlled’ by them. It puts, in my view, too much power into the hands of the political machinery of the parties, and reduces the power of each empowered citizen. It is perhaps much more appropriate to rely on the fact that candidates for election to each chamber can be put forward by political organisations based on experience of ‘life and system’ for election directly by empowered citizens using an absolutely common electoral system – STV PR – and have them selected, after scrutiny by the electorate. This greatly reduces the risk of cronyism, retains power where it belongs and also allows both experienced and independent candidates to stand. For readers to understand the concepts of STV and PR generally, further individual reading will be necessary. It is not within the scope of this essay to explore them in detail, but the concept of empowered citizenship demands such individual exploration. Within a changed culture, the idea of exploration within these sorts of areas is developed from an early age through the education system.

Elected representatives in all chambers, and bodies have personal challenges to recognise their roles and responsibilities as merely touchers of citizens’ power in the way they operate. This, along with all processes executed within the particular elected body should be clearly and legally defined in a Parliament Act (in the case of the national chambers) and in other similar legally-binding documents, in other elected bodies – common across all identical areas of government.

The formal relationship between empowered citizens and those elected to represent them, in all democratic bodies, should be clearly defined in a written constitution, which forms a contract between all citizens and those elected to represent them. This written constitution will cover all aspects of the rights, responsibilities and activities of all participants in the democratic system and processes. In my view, current constitutions (at least those I have looked at) are not broad enough to clearly and securely define these relationships to safeguard citizens’ power. Arguments are made

that definitions ‘too broad’ undermine a government’s flexibility in operating in the international arena, but this produces the potential of separating ‘state’ from citizens, dismantling to some degree, the whole concept that democracy belongs to the people.

The role and responsibilities of empowered citizens, reflecting the need to ensure a change of culture which becomes embedded in individual attitudes and behaviour, can be developed by a commitment in education from an early age to put a high emphasis on a recognition of what belongs within each person’s space, including an equal share of power. The underlying foundation of this power can be established by helping a student understand how they personally can exercise it as they develop. This is not, by any means, indoctrination and neither is it rote-learning, but is, instead, a principle of culturally embedding an idea that exploration of both what lies within each individuals space (within personal boundaries) and exploration of how it can be externalised is vital to be fully participative in such a changed culture.

It is, of course, necessary to address the concept of Head of State. In current systems and cultures, the role and foundation of the institution of the Head of State varies from nation to nation, and has in most cases, evolved as the culture and society has evolved, based on the nations foundations. For example, in Great Britain, the Head of State reflects today (in almost every way) the same fundamentals as it did at its national establishment embodied by Aethelstan in the 10th century. The idea of monarchy may well have had some necessary basis at the particular point in societal evolution, due to the lack of sophistication in knowledge and infrastructure, where in order to implement any sort of law and order, a strong central hand was a hook to hang these ideas on, and a point of focus for making it a reality of some kind. In today’s society however, such a concept as monarchy, in particular when it maintains many, if not all, of its medieval vestiges, albeit in a slightly less obvious outward manner, is anachronistic. It is apparent that if at all critically analysed, the current monarchy reacts with all the medieval brutality (albeit slightly tempered by modern cultural norms) of its ancestry, demonstrating clearly its inappropriateness for the modern age.

In a democratic system which embeds power in the citizen (as it should), the Head of State’s role is one of national representation in the international arena, as a ceremonial representative, but much more fundamentally as the defender of the constitution (along with their officers) on behalf of the citizens. They are there to ensure that the citizens’ government and elected representatives never abuse their position and always operate within the constitution (the contract between the citizens and their elected representatives). This role can only be effective if the Head of State is elected directly by the citizens for a specific and limited term of office. It is also, in my view, extremely important that the Head of State – a non-executive President – is ‘one of us’ and not ‘one of them’, In other words, that the President is by law, not to have ever held any political office of any kind, thus ensuring that they do not have a vested interest on behalf of any political class, institution or organisation.

There is nothing to limit the specific number of levels of democratic bodies within a nation, other than the nations ‘make up’ and preferences. There are, for example, nations which consist of different historical and (to some degree) cultural and even ethnic backgrounds. Such nations may choose a federal model, if appropriate. The suggestions made above, and also below (to follow), can be equally applicable in these cases too. It is very beneficial, in my view, that the definition of roles and responsibilities between different levels of government are also legally defined in sufficiently comprehensive documentation. These will depend entirely on the specific national circumstances. With regard to the relationship of each tier of government and the electors thereof, a formal constitution is extremely important in each case. Constitutional reviews and the implementation of any changes can be dealt with regular constitutional conventions, held regardless of whether there are specific proposed changes (from wherever they may come) to ensure freshness and focus of keeping the constitution at each level, as a living concept. This whole area does not represent a

bureaucracy. If the notion of a bureaucracy is anything, it is only the ongoing apparatus/infrastructure which is required to execute the underlying processes of, in this case, government. This bureaucracy can be as small or as large as each individual nation decides. The ideas outlined in these essays do not pre-define anything in this area. On this subject, in order to ensure connectivity in many broad ways, between tiers of government, it is, in my view, a very important idea that there is a common service supporting and implementing the execution of government across the whole system. This is, I understand, what happens in France. In Great Britain, however, the civil service is only a national government agency, and local and devolved government employ and operate their own government support services. This is disjointed and wastes many opportunities for common practices, sharing of best practices, communication, mobility, efficiency and also, importantly, underlying focus on 'travel in a common and shared direction'.

If the idea that power resides permanently, equally and exclusively in the hands of every citizen, then the culture of government must surely change from one of master to servant. This has very broad and deep implications, but primarily here, I want to focus on just one or two of them. Firstly, is the idea that government at all levels has deeply embedded in the way it operates, a commitment at all times to not only support but actively encourage and promote the whole concept of active, participatory democratic citizenship in all its aspects. This includes the clearly understood concept that all of a citizen's rights belong permanently and exclusively to the citizen. They exist entirely within the boundaries of the citizen's own space, and that they cannot be stolen or usurped by anyone. Rights can only be changed by law, and the lawmakers must recognise that at all times they execute their function only with the permission of the citizenship. Secondly, as servants of all citizens equally, there must be a deeply embedded commitment at all levels of government to not only support, but actively encourage and promote the personal development of every citizen to achieve at their highest potential in all areas they wish to explore. This can be summarised as 'High Challenge, High Support', where the whole system and all who participate in it, have as a focus a shared commitment to be as brilliant as possible in as many areas as is chosen to be explored, individually, communally and nationally.

A system and all of its citizens, committed to such foundations and principles, can surely have a much better opportunity to create a significantly enhanced quality of life for every citizen and also for the quality of its relationships within the Community of Life.