

DEMOCRACY WITHOUT POLITICIANS?

Dave Zachariah

April 10, 2007

A classical proposal

This article argues for a far more representative form of government than modern parliamentary systems, one that can better address the issues of common citizens. To cut the argument short, the proposal is:

- *A direct assembly of citizens*, made possible by modern communication technology.
- *Citizen councils with appointees chosen at random*.

These ideas are by no means new. They are based on ancient insights put in practice as early as the 5th century B.C.

Some ancient insights from Athens

Most modern parliamentary states have a set of democratic *rights* (such as freedom of speech and assembly, etc.) won through important popular struggles in the late-19th and 20th century. But as a *form of government*, these states are quite distinct from classical democracy that existed in the Greek city-state of Athens for more than 200 years: None of its central institutions had any elected officials!

Athenian democracy rested on three main institutions: *The Assembly*, which made decrees and legislated. Any citizen could attend it, to make speeches and vote. *The Council of 500*, served as the full-time government but merely enacted the policies of the Assembly. It consisted of 500 citizens randomly chosen by lot. A new selection was made each year and a citizen could at most serve on the council twice in their lifetime. The legal system rested on *The People's Court*. Its juries were

also made up of representatives drawn by lot. In sum, election of officials was an exception, confined mainly to generals, since commanding the military required expert knowledge and experience.

Of course, in ancient Athens citizenship excluded slaves and women and we have no reason to follow them on this. Nonetheless, poor peasants and artisans had an equal right in decision making as wealthy land and slave owners. The power, property and privileges of no person was safe from the sovereignty held by the citizens.

Parliamentarism and unrepresentative representatives

In modern parliamentary states political parties compete through elections to control state power. When parties are based on mass movements, it ensures a degree of popular control on party representatives. However, the right to vote is not the same as the right to exercise power and sooner or later the oligarchic nature of parliamentarism becomes apparent in the lack of:

- *Accountability*. It may take years before the people can vote unpopular politicians out of power. Politicians seeking careers and privileges will not support any proposals that threaten their interests. If they collectively decide to raise their salaries, paid by the citizens, who is going to stop them?
- *Representation*. Have a look at the politicians in your national parliament. Do they reflect the citizens in terms of age, gender, ethnicity or class? Do full-time politicians act in accordance with the same experiences and interests as common people? Patronage and nepotism worsen the representation further.

- *Participation.* How often do you have a say in the decisions that affect you and your family's lives? Some politicians sit and debate in parliament for decades, while other people's issues and concerns are never even considered. When faced with demands for referendums, politicians often reveal their contempt for the will of the people they claim to serve.

This is an *inevitable result of elected decision makers*. No matter how well intentions political parties and candidates have initially, their primary goal is to win and maintain power, in worst case for privilege. Democracy, as originally understood, is the rule of the common people; Parliamentarism, on the other hand, is the rule of professional politicians.

A brief elaboration of the proposal

The guiding principle here is that those affected by a decision should have an opportunity to make it.

Each year citizens could collectively decide on a few major issues, such as: the level of taxation; changes in the share of the budget going to education, health care, infrastructure, national defence; war or peace. These issues could be debated by randomly drawn citizens and experts on national television and then voted electronically by the viewers. Public internet servers could be set up to channelise public opinion; issues are brought up, if they gather sufficient signatures they are subject to referendums. This would be a modern Assembly.

Naturally there is only a limited number of issues that can be brought to public vote each year. Appointees in national councils must run the daily decision making, coordinating and allocating resources to local councils. For example a local council administering a hospital could be made up by a random sample of local residents and workers at the hospital. The appointees in the national health care council could be drawn by the same principle or by a random sample from a pool of candidates elected by the local councils. In any case, their term of service is limited. They are economically compensated for loss of work and subject to recall.

Some common objections to neoclassical democracy

Objection 1: Ordinary people are incompetent.

Reply: No more incompetent than the average politician who lacks technical knowledge in specific matters. Moreover, the citizen councils outlined above ensure that expertise is combined with the political judgement of citizens who act on the basis of interests shared with others.

Objection 2: They have no experience in direct democracy.

Reply: That is a matter of practice. The general principles are not only found in ancient Athens or the Althing assembly in Iceland in the Middle Ages, but also in the jury system, the modern Swiss cantons and recently in the Canadian province of British Columbia that set up a Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform in which members were chosen at random.

Objection 3: The reforms are too radical.

Reply: They need not to be imposed all at once but can begin gradually on the local level. Online referendums and citizen councils can easily replace the functions of a local administration.

Objection 4: No politician will support such reforms.

Reply: Therefore the first step is to build mass opinion for neoclassical democracy. Faced with pressure of reform it will become evident which politicians are democrats and which are not.

References

- [1] Blackwell, C., 2003. 'Athenian Democracy: a brief overview'. Available at: <http://www.stoa.org/projects/demos/home>
- [2] Burnheim, J., 1985. *Is Democracy Possible?* University of California Press.
- [3] Cockshott, P., 2006. 'Electronic and Athenian Democracy', given at Workshop on e-Voting and e-Government in the UK. Available at: <http://www.dcs.gla.ac.uk/~wpc/reports/>
- [4] Finley, M. I., 1985. *Democracy Ancient & Modern*. Revised edition. Rutgers University Press.