

# Democracy by Statistical Representation

John Burnheim

Surely we have democracy? No! *Not* if it means that all citizens have an equal chance of an *active* participation in public affairs. What we actually have is a competition between organised political elites for the majority vote, which gives them the right to govern. We elect professional power-brokers who trade with each other their votes and patronage. The results of the game are determined by concentrating power in organisations which are not controlled directly by the people affected by their activities — political parties, commercial organisations, lobby groups of all sorts and so on. These in turn attempt to manipulate public opinion and voting behaviour, especially the relatively small group of 'swinging voters' in marginal electorates. On the whole the power of the electorate is limited to refusing to re-elect a government that offends these strategically placed bodies of voters. It is a far better system than any of its actual competitors, but it has very serious weaknesses.

The central problem is that it rests on an assumption that public life throughout the world must be organised in the form of states (meaning here national governments and related bodies, not what are called states in Australia). States exercise sovereignty over every aspect of life in a given territory through their monopoly of legitimate force. The system of states normally ensures a sort of peace and order within each country, but at the cost of a perpetual tendency to war between states. Internal peace is achieved at the price of a concentration of power that breeds abuse of power. Rival groups strive to use state power to their own ends, and in doing so constantly tend to increase the range of functions of the state and the range of means at its disposal. Social life becomes more and more standardised, bureaucratised and mystified. The tasks of government become increasingly more difficult and as they fail in those tasks

governments are drawn into repression and war.

Advocates of 'small government' contrast the efficiency and responsiveness of the market with the inflexibility, expense and stifling effects of bureaucracy. But the market, too, is far from democratic. If it enables us to have a more flexible say in what we get as consumers, it gives most of us very little opportunity as producers. Most of us simply sell to somebody else the right to tell us what to do in our work. Moreover, the market cannot take account of things like the needs of future generations, the provision of public goods, or the righting of wrongs. One may argue endlessly about its scope, but there must be a 'public sector'.

One of the crucial powers of the state is that of taxation. I believe, in sympathy with Henry George, that public revenue should come from the revenue



*"... And if elected I promise government by the people, of the people, for the people, in the people, over, around, through, above, behind, below, after, with and without the people."*

from natural resources, though I envisage the way in which this would best happen and its rationale somewhat differently. The power to tax should, if possible, be eliminated.

## Functional Decentralisation

In the context of the state, public goods of all sorts are provided by centralised authorities at each level of government. Even at the local city, municipal or shire level a large range of functions (roads, parks and recreation facilities, health clinics, libraries, building regulations, waste collection and so on) are provided by a centralised body, even though there is no reason in terms of the functions themselves for doing so. The problems of libraries are quite different from those of garbage collection, and each has more affinity with similar activities in other areas than with each other. Moreover, granted modern mobility and the diversity of people's work and recreational interests, the local community hardly exists. We belong to

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many different specialised communities that overlap each other in a host of differing and fluid patterns.

The diverse activities that are joined together at municipal level are united solely by the need for administrative and financial control. Would it not be better to hand each over to a committee of people who had an interest in that specific activity? That way we would abolish a level of bureaucracy, allow more flexible allocation of geographical boundaries to various activities, and increase the opportunities of popular participation.

The same principle can be applied at every level of government, right up to international level. The idea of a world state is horrifying. But there are already some international agencies that exercise considerable authority in specific areas without being dependent on any higher body. The functions of states could be dispersed to a variety of independent bodies. Naturally, these would have to co-operate among themselves and recognise appropriate regulatory and adjudicating bodies which would hear appeals against them, adjust their constitutions in tune with changing circumstances and needs, and resolve disputes between them. Insofar as these higher bodies need co-ordination in turn, it would not be a matter of some higher power forcing them to obey its injunctions but of a recognised arbitrating body settling disputes brought before it. The sanction on bodies that refused to accept arbitration would be the refusal of other bodies to co-operate with them. Since each specialised body would need the co-operation of many other bodies in many ways, the sanctions could be very powerful. There would be no self-sufficient or sovereign bodies at any level.

### Democracy by Statistical Representation

Supposing that it is in fact possible to break up the bodies that provide various public needs into specialised functional agencies of this sort, how is it possible to control them democratically? Elections would not be satisfactory. Each of us has some interest in an enormous range of activities, not because we are actively involved in them, but because they affect us in varying degrees. Because we cannot know much about the various policies that might be pursued in all these areas, about the candidates seeking office or about the practical problems of doing anything

to change things, we cannot make an intelligent vote in most cases. Moreover, granted the extreme unlikelihood of our vote making any difference to the outcome, it would not be sensible to try. On the other hand, most of us could get to know and understand quite a lot about a few of the activities that affect us if we had any incentive to do the necessary work, if we had a substantial chance of having a significant say in the matter.

In the absence of such opportunities there is little we can do in most cases except vote for a party ticket. At least a party endorsement tells us something about a candidate. But that puts power back in the hands of party machines, powerful lobbies and the professional image makers. Politics becomes a career and careers depend on patronage. The power game takes over at the expense of substantive issues.



*"Now, the first thing we'll do is set up some form of government."*

The alternative is that representatives be chosen not by voting, which is a very poor way of conveying and aggregating information, but by a statistical procedure that ensures that the representatives are representative of those affected by the decisions they will have to make, weighted to take account of the importance of the varying ways in which different groups are affected. The representatives would need to display an interest in being chosen by nominating for selection, and one would expect that in most areas there would be a good chance of a candidate getting a turn on the relevant committee sooner or later. So it would be worth their while to try to find out as much as possible about the activities in which they expressed an interest and follow the pro-

ceedings of that committee. Moreover, one might expect that such committees would be more responsive to suggestions and criticism than politicians or bureaucrats as we know them.

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### A statistical procedure ensures that the representatives are representative of those affected by the decisions they will have to make.

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Members on each committee would be replaced one by one at regular intervals in order to ensure continuity. Political organisations might, of course, urge their members to nominate for various committees in the hope of influencing their decisions. But they would not have the power over their members that parties now have, since there would be no place for endorsement, advancement or patronage. It would be very difficult, too, for these committees to become corrupt, since the membership would be constantly changing in a random way, and those who had served on the committees would probably keep a keen eye on their successors. If the committee veered too much in a certain direction that would stimulate a rash of nominations from people of the opposite tendency for the next round of random selection.

The higher level bodies which would allocate resources, adjudicate disputes, hear appeals and so on would be chosen by lot from a pool of people nominated by their peers on lower level bodies as having the qualities necessary for these more difficult tasks. There are obviously many ways in which various social systems might work using such a framework.

My own preference would be for a 'market socialism' in which each of the major natural and accumulated resources would be entrusted to committees of trustees who would lease them out to entrepreneurs, whether individual, companies or co-operatives, under conditions designed to protect the environment, the public interest and the interests of posterity. The lease fees would be set high enough to provide a substantial public revenue out of which each body would contribute an agreed amount to various more or less fixed purposes (e.g. social insurance) and then make grants from the remainder to various

public bodies that applied for assistance. In this way there would be neither taxation nor any supreme power over public resources and public money.

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Naturally, this is only the barest outline of a proposal. It is intended to stimulate thought and discussion and ultimately action. I have attempted to argue for it in greater depth and detail in my book *Is Democracy Possible?*<sup>1</sup> It offers a possibility of revolutionising a complex advanced society without concentrating power in a revolutionary party. At the very least it offers a way of dealing with the problem of public needs and at the same time whittling away the power of the state, even if that power is never finally abolished. Above all, it offers the possibility of a society where the tomfoolery and corruption of our present political parties is supplemented by rational discussion of public issues in which everybody who wants to can take a significant part.

### **Objections**

Many radicals are suspicious of the idea of statistical representation of those affected by decisions, because they cling to the idea of an elite leadership transforming society from above, in spite of their democratic rhetoric.

There are, however, two important elements of substance in this objection. The first is that representation of existing interests would tend to freeze the existing pattern of social relations. Clearly there are crucial problems about what constitutes a legitimate and significant interest, and the decisions made on such matters would be open to continual challenge before the quasi-judicial bodies which would hear proposals for restructuring the first-level bodies. In fact, since the representation formulae could be changed relatively easily in particular cases on the merits of the case, the system could be quite flexible and dynamic.

The second point is that ordinary people are often fairly conservative and short-sighted. They may want to preserve existing arrangements because they are used to them and afraid of

change, even when the change would benefit them in the long run. So, for example, they often fight to keep lousy jobs rather than risk being unemployed or take their chances of getting a better job. What I want to argue is that if people are actively involved in restructuring and have to face up to the problem of producing the best workable compromise they can, they will rise to the challenge. One must remember that the people who are to be represented are not only those who have an interest in existing arrangements by reason of benefiting in some ways from them, but also those who are adversely affected by them.

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Again, many conservatives and not a few radicals are excessively influenced by the idea that the further away an authority is from the specific problems and interests involved in a particular matter the more it is likely to be impartial. So they are very suspicious of the idea of bringing decision-making closer to the actual participants. I believe there is very good reason for these suspicions when democratic participation takes the form of mass voting, political parties and pressure groups. I am equally confident that one can overcome these problems when the decision is in the hands of people who are well aware of the specific problems and want to reach a workable solution to them, and who are not beholden to such organisations. Almost everybody in contemporary societies is aware that any social decision is inevitably a compromise, just as any economic, technological or personal decision involves conflicting considerations. The important thing is that only those factors that are genuinely relevant to the specific case are considered in reaching a solution. The further one gets away from specifics the more the ideological, organisational and power interests of 'higher' structures take over. Often governmental bodies cannot adopt a very attractive solution because it is administratively

difficult, or would create a precedent they fear, or is against the ideological views of their constituents, all of which are irrelevant to the real issues.

Finally, it may appear that emphasis on negotiation between representatives of the specific substantive interests involved leads to marginalising broad moral and social concerns. I believe that this is completely mistaken. In the first place, people who are concerned to reach an agreed solution to a specific problem are going to argue not just on the basis of the pay-off to their narrow interests. They are going to argue on the basis of fairness, social and ecological consequences and how it will affect their children. Indeed, where there are conflicting interests such common concerns are likely to be decisive in reaching any agreement. Obviously such concerns operate most effectively when they are injected into specific grassroots decisions. We have seen enough of the failures to improve social relations by legislative and bureaucratic procedures. Surely it is time to give more power to genuinely responsible bodies.

### **Strategies**

One of the great advantages of the system I am advocating, which I call 'demarchy', is that it can be introduced piecemeal. The first step is to get across the idea that genuine representation is statistical representation. People are unlikely to accept the idea wholeheartedly at first. Elitism is deeply entrenched in our culture, not least in those who are disadvantaged by it. A start might be made by pushing the idea of statistically representative bodies as advisory bodies, along the lines of the work of the Jefferson Center.<sup>2</sup> One might start with specific temporary bodies such as investigative or consultative committees and then press for such bodies to be made permanent and to be given executive powers.

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**The first step toward 'demarchy' is to get across the idea that genuine representation is statistical representation.**

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At the same time we might press for school boards, hospital boards and other such institutions to be revitalised and given greater freedom on a demarchical basis. It is crucial that we be able to

demonstrate that such bodies can be effective and efficient operating bodies, not just talking shops or covers for a bureaucracy. Once the practice of entrusting public institutions to demarchical committees was established, one might expect a great surge of support for extending the principle into other areas of government. We could begin whit-ling away at the state.

It is less than a hundred years since universal voting became established as the norm of democratic procedure, in spite of grave misgivings about it. It remains the only way we have of controlling the state. But it has not brought and cannot bring genuine participatory democracy, and it is full of dangers. The time has come to think of a genuinely democratic society on a realistic basis.

#### REFERENCES

1. John Burnheim, *Is Democracy Possible? The Alternative to Electoral Politics* (London: Polity Press, 1985).
2. See Ned Crosby, "The Peace Movement and New Democratic Processes", in this issue of *Social Alternatives*.

## A DAY IN THE LIFE

Honoured women who hover majestically  
at luncheons  
Brandishing sharp champagne  
Whose husbands always have excuses  
adulterous lies  
think charity is hell  
They bloom then wrinkle in the light  
behind fly-eyed sunglasses  
Glitter in the dark  
Change face, new hair  
Living is what the house is all about  
Eating is a pleasurable hobby  
but not too much  
Fingernails clacking as they talk  
Pink or vermilion  
Anti-piano talons  
You'll go down in the circle's history  
as somebody prominent  
ever good intentional  
who'll maybe one day write a book  
or marry, again, again, again  
until you drop.

C.J. FLETCHER

## Autumn 1986 — Remembering Chernobyl

In this quiet June weather  
the last yellow quince forgets to fall  
(brown wrens skittering over the grass)  
while men in dark suits with briefcases and economics degrees  
doctor the economy  
other men with cracked smiles on TV screens offer utopias  
watch opinion polls  
and give tax concessions to millionaires.

In South Africa, coffins are lowered daily into the dull earth;  
In Europe after Chernobyl mothers give their children iodine tablets;  
politicians offer reassurances,  
and god has taken her sleeping bag, a tent and a good supply  
of Kleenex  
and joined the women's camp at Greenham Common.

M. Morris