

Are elections the ultimate in democracy?

By Brian Martin

The belief that electoral politics is the same as democracy is deep seated. It is held by people across the political spectrum.

To be sure, there is much dissatisfaction with electioneering. Politicians are sold like breakfast cereals; personalities dominate over issues; attention to the supposed whims of swinging voters takes precedence over wider issues.

Furthermore, it probably doesn't matter too much who is elected, since the programs of the major parties are so similar. In any case, much policy is made and implemented by government bureaucrats who are not up for election.

The solution to such problems is usually seen as electoral politics with a new content: better candidates, new parties, fairer procedures, a better-educated electorate. The major problem is seen, not as the electoral system itself, but as the people who are elected and the policies they implement.

Is there any alternative? We have all been taught that representative democracy is the best political system available. Perhaps it is time to question that postulate.

Of course, many on the left want to abolish private ownership of capital. But how are decisions to be made in a democratic socialist society? Parliamentary democracy? Workplace councils? It's hard to know, since there has been so little discussion of systems of decision-making suitable for a socialist society that is not run by party elites.

In many social movement groups, such as feminist and environmental groups, consensus decision-making has been developed to a fine art. But using consensus techniques in larger groups, involving tens of thousands of people or more, is a daunting prospect even for the advocates of this approach.

There needs to be much more discussion of participatory alternatives to representative democracy — alternatives that can coordinate activity in a large and complex society with strong differences of opinion.

John Burnheim has proposed a comprehensive alternative in his book *Is Democracy Possible?* Burnheim proposes to get rid of politicians and governments altogether and replace them with decision-making groups of randomly selected citizens.

Random selection has a long history as a democratic technique. It was used by the ancient Greeks and is used today for selecting jurors.

Burnheim introduces some variations on the jury system. Most importantly, he proposes that there be a whole network of groups, each one dealing with a particular policy area in a local area, such as schooling, transport, industry and waste disposal. This would be quite different from the present system in which politicians are expected to make decisions on all possible issues.

Burnheim suggests that group members be chosen randomly only from volunteers for that group. In this way, education policy in different regions, for example, would be decided by different groups of citizens chosen randomly from those who specifically nominated for that group.

The random selection principle could easily be designed to give a representative cross-section of the population, such as equal numbers of women and men, proportional numbers of minority groups, etc.

An advantage of this system is that political wheeling and dealing would be reduced. Lobbyists would have a harder time applying pressure to decision-makers, especially as terms of office would be strictly limited.

But would randomly selected citizens do a good job? Some cynics might suggest that they could hardly do worse than present politicians. Fortunately, there is evidence available. For over a decade, two independent teams of researchers have been studying the possibility of policy making by randomly selected groups of citizens.

One team, based at the University of Wuppertal, Germany, has used "planning cells" to look at energy policy, town planning and information technology. The other studies have been done at the Jefferson Center in Minneapolis, USA, using what they call "policy juries" to examine issues such as water pollution from agricultural run-off.

The randomly selected citizens on the planning cells and policy juries hear testimony from experts and advocates of different views, and then spend their few days together making a collective judgment on the issue at hand. The results are encouraging. The group members quickly become very knowledgeable about the issues, take their tasks very seriously and, when more than one group is used, arrive at fairly consistent results. Furthermore, the group members become committed to the decision-making process.

Back in Australia, Canberra-based researchers Fred and Merilyn Emery have done pioneering work on random selection and democracy, especially in its application in industry. It has long been known that productivity and job satisfaction can be increased by greater worker participation. Random selection is one way to do this.

Burnheim decided that his alternative is so different from rep-

resentative democracy that he calls it by a different name: demarchy. It involves a dramatic shift in thinking. And long before it can be implemented on a wide scale, it requires much more development and experimentation.

One objection often made against participatory democracy is that everyone can't be an expert on every issue, hence everyone can't participate in an informed way. Demarchy overcomes this objection, because most individuals can, if they wish, become knowledgeable about a few subjects and nominate for the relevant groups. They can then rely on others, as we presently do, to make sensible decisions on other issues.

As well, the usual processes of public debate, protest and mobilisation of opinion could continue. Randomly selected individuals, unlike elected politicians, can claim no mandate for their positions. This, along with strictly limited terms of office and restriction to a single area of policy, means that the corruptions of power would be greatly limited.

Perhaps there is no ideal way to organise society, but certainly the present system is not the ultimate — even if progressive parties were elected to government. The challenge for a society is to be more than a static democracy, but to continually be in the process of democratising itself. ■



Determined to defeat bigotry

Looking OUT

Brandon Astor Jones

Situated 51 miles south-west of Syracuse, New York, the tiny hamlet of New Berlin is reflective of many US small towns. Anthony Wemer and his son Tony discovered a burning cross in their yard. A burning cross is one of the perverse symbols most often used by the Ku Klux Klan's hate-mongers to terrorise their victims. The burning cross is very often the symbolic prelude to an act of lethal violence.

Usually a burning cross can be found in the front yard of a house newly occupied by an African-American family seeking a better life in that endless quest to escape the squalor of poverty. Hate-mongers use the terror associated with the burning cross to scare us (Blacks) out of what they self-righteously consider to be *their* neighbourhood.

The irony in this particular cross burning is that the Wemers are not black — they are white. You see, they have a friend whose name is Lee Brown. He is black and, as you might suspect in a society as racist as the United States, he is out of work and has been staying with the Wemers while he seeks employment. We should not be surprised that Brown has been unsuccessful in finding a job in or around New Berlin.

The Wemers have received at least two anonymous phone calls, obviously from some of their neighbours, who covertly admit that they hate blacks and want Brown to leave. A friend of the Wemers, Sue Keene, quoted in the *Louisville Defender*, said, "It takes forever to be accepted into this community. There is no reason for this. This kid [referring to Brown] does nothing wrong."

Well-meaning lady that I suspect Keene is, it would seem she has forgotten that in the myopic vision of a racist bigot, Brown did all the wrong required of him when he was born

black. In the eyes of the racist, Wemer's crime is that he doesn't hate Lee Brown for being born black.

Having to constantly peer out their windows, the Wemers feel their home is under a state of silent siege. They have put up a \$500 reward for information leading to the arrest of the person or persons responsible for placing and lighting the cross in their front yard.

State police captain Walt de Lap, the head of that department's Troop C, Bureau of Criminal Investigation, said that the bias crime team is investigating the case. Captain de Lap also said, "At this point in time we are investigating it as a bias related crime perpetrated by some ... bigot. There is no room in this world for people like that. They are excellent people to arrest. We like to do it."

Unfortunately, during all this turmoil Brown's father died, and of course he went to the family home in Rockland County, to be present at the funeral. Nevertheless, he said he plans to return to the Wemer home.

Anthony Wemer said of him, "He's more damned determined to be up here [New Berlin] than ever, and I'm more determined to have him here." We should all be proud and thankful that both men are so determined to stand tall against racism and bigotry.

[The writer is a prisoner on death row in the United States. He is happy to receive letters commenting on his columns. He can be written to at: Brandon Astor Jones, EF-122216, G2-51, GD&CC, PO Box 3877, Jackson, GA 30233, USA.]