

Making global decisions

By Brian Martin

It is easy to criticise present methods of global decision-making. Typically, the most powerful governments impose their wills directly or indirectly. For example, the nuclear weapons states maintain their arsenals while doing everything they can to stop "proliferation" to other countries. The US government ordered the mining of Nicaragua's harbours and then ignored the ruling of the World Court. The agendas of trade talks and environmental summits are shaped by dominant states.

International and private bodies are often no better. The world banking system serves the rich and exploits the poor countries. The United Nations has acted as a fig leaf for big-power interventions.

Yes, it is easy to criticise, but what is the alternative? Unfortunately, images of a democratic world order remain undeveloped.

A lot of problems can be overcome by decentralisation, in which local communities actively participate in the decisions that affect them. This could include workers' control as well as a participatory political system.

Yet even if every country were socialist, environmentalist, democratic — you name it — there would be many tough global decisions to be made. For example, what policies should be made on population control? What barriers to immigration should be allowed? What is the

trade-off between increasing material standards of living in a poor region and an increased impact on fragile environments?

Global environmental problems such as the greenhouse effect and ozone depletion cannot easily be dealt with solely by local decisions, however participatory they may be. Some global coordination is needed.

What about a global parliament to deal only with truly global issues, leaving all other decisions to local communities? There are problems with this. Of course, the United Nations is far from democratic, especially considering the role of the Security Council.

Assume that the UN were democratised and that the General Assembly could make binding decisions on its own. Would these decisions be representative of world "public opinion"? It's highly unlikely, considering how remote representatives are from their constituencies even within countries. In a 150-country assembly, Australia would be represented by just one person. Or, more fairly, in a 300-member assembly chosen from equal-population regions, Australia would be represented by just one person. There is no way that one person could represent the diversity of opinion in Australia on even one issue, much less a whole array of issues.

Earlier this year (*Green Left*, July 14) I raised the idea of "demarchy", an alternative to electoral democracy proposed by John Burnheim in his book *Is Democracy Possible?* Demarchy is based on two important principles for decision-making. First, there are separate decision-making groups for each function or issue in each local area, such as child-care, transport and fisheries. Second, members of each decision-

making group are chosen randomly from volunteers, for strictly limited terms.

Both these principles undermine the enormous power, so often abused, given to elected representatives. Having separate groups for different functions means that no politician can make decisions across a wide range of issues. This eliminates vote-trading and other pathologies of parliamentary bodies. Using random selection eliminates the claimed mandate for the person selected. It also removes the point of political parties and reduces the ability of vested interests to influence representatives. There is much else that could be said about demarchy, but there is not space here to go into the arguments.

Applying the concept of demarchy to global decision-making means getting away from the idea that there must be a central assembly or world parliament that makes decisions on a range of issues. Instead, decision-making is broken down into a range of separate topics. Each topic has its own body.

The best existing examples are those global organisations that deal with sports, such as rugby league or tennis, and with services such as the post and computer networks. There are actually a host of such bodies that provide services or make rules. They have their own disputes and problems, naturally, but for the most part manage without the problems characteristic of big power politics. Indeed, the problems that do occur are due largely to intervention from governments. You do not need to be sympathetic to the goals of sports bodies or computer networks, or agree with the particular decisions made by them, to appreciate the value of their decision-making systems.

To extend demarchic principles globally would mean two things. First, decisions on many more areas, especially those now monopolised by governments, would be delegated to specialist global bodies. Eventually this could include many economic functions. Second,

these specialist global bodies would be run or overseen by groups whose members were randomly selected. The randomly selected members could be chosen so that particular regions or other salient groups were represented.

But would you want just any volunteer, however inexperienced, being able to sit on a global decision-making body? If desired, members of global bodies could be selected randomly only from those who, having already served on relevant local bodies, were nominated by their peers for global office.

With electronic communications, it would not even be necessary to travel: a computer and modem would be all that was required to participate. Studies of computer networks show that participation in electronic groups is more equal than in face-to-face meetings.

With such a system, decision-makers would be far less open to the corruptions of power than present-day politicians. Participation would be greater and, with all deliberations made public, there would be ample scope for community discussion of key issues.

Demarchy is thus far just an idea. Many of the trends in the world today are in the opposite direction, towards greater political centralisation, bureaucratisation and professionalisation. Many alternative groups seek to occupy existing positions of power and use them for their own ends, rather than try to change the system of decision-making itself.

Nevertheless, there are opportunities for change. Networking is playing an increasing role worldwide, especially via computers. What are needed are significant initiatives by sizeable groups to try out random selection. After all, electoral systems require a lot of fine-tuning, not to mention money and labour, to work well. Whether demarchy can be an improvement can only be determined by giving it a fair shake.

For those who would like to further investigate demarchy and global decision-making, I recommend John Burnheim's chapter in *New Forms of Democracy*, edited by David Held and Christopher Pollitt. I thank Ron Guignard (*Green Left*, July 21) for pointing out the importance of the global dimension in demarchy. ■