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Perceptions of Participation, and ten pieces of reform

Like the weather, everyone talks about participation but no one does anything about it. The sincere and challenging calls for active citizenship and consumer empowerment that accompanied New Labour's arrival have not increased participation. Indeed, a government genuinely committed to civic responsibility and the decentralization of service provision now gazes in confusion at the implacable disinterest of the populace. There have been devolutionary reforms, voting machines in Tesco's and Big Conversations. And still the giant sleeps.

Once again, we are left to contemplate our ineffectiveness in deepening democracy, our lack of understanding of civic disengagement and our blindness to the causes of mistrust in government. New Labour seems to have underestimated the difficulties of increasing participation, and has struggled to find a clear understanding of the concept. One part warmed-up communitarianism, one part Downsian rational choice, yet another of audit culture, New Labour comes dangerously close to being participatory democrats while in opposition and Schumpeterian elitists when in power. In the face of this evident failure to increase participation, we must learn from mistakes and act decisively. Either that, or go down in history not for improving democracy, but for an inadvertent contribution to its demise.

In fact, participation presents itself in quite different ways to policy makers and active citizens. This paper examines these distinct perspectives, and argues that a clearer understanding of their differences should inform policies to deepen democracy. Indeed, the suggestion here is that, when left unmanaged, these divergent views of participation serve to powerfully exacerbate the growing separation of government and citizen. We are thus faced with a choice: to recognise and manage this separation pragmatically, or to slip, ever more seductively, into two competing and self-reinforcing positions of mutual distrust. The paper then outlines ten pieces of reform by which participation could be realistically and effectively increased.

A clear view of participation is hard to come by, for it depends where you stand. Policy makers, think tanks and scholars gaze out over the whole landscape of society, and design institutions and procedures to increase participation. Appeals are made to the duty of citizens to involve themselves in politics, and funds are apportioned for participatory initiatives, for which accountability is insisted upon in return.

From this perspective, efforts to increase participation must be balanced with the need for effective organization and leadership. The sleeping giant of participation must be woken if the government is to receive feedback on its policies and legitimacy for its actions. Yet this giant is of dubious character. Rude, ungrateful and for the most part disinterested in politics, citizens show an annoying tendency to object to executive decisions. To those with an elevated view of policy and politics, the citizen appears as an obstacle to be overcome, as an opportunistic advocate of partial interests, as an ill-informed fool. The citizen does not engage with the problem of effective organization and leadership, does not join in and, upon awakening, evinces a marked hot-headedness. As policy makers seek to deepen democracy, they quickly become confused as to whether or not they *really* want to wake up the large, snoring and unpredictable being in the corner. From the perspective of those in governance, the citizen is not to be trusted.

Yet, from the point of view of the active citizen, appeals by government for participation seem strangely off the mark, even faintly absurd. Faced with their own concerns and the monolith of incumbent executive power,

participation becomes a personal act of working with others so as to be heard, as a testing and exciting kind of collective action, as a bold chance for a different outcome and a different self-perception. Here, in the communities of risk emerging all around us, voting is not enough, and the usual ways of running hierarchical organizations seem inadequate. Active citizens are thus experimenting with new kinds of participation, new ways of organizing to ensure effectiveness, and they are doing so outside organized parties. From this perspective, government, politicians and representative institutions appear as peddling their own interests, as unable to listen, as not to be trusted.

In regard to participation, the policy maker and the citizen gaze upon different worlds. In the former, participation is desired, yet always threatens to hamper executive decision-making. In the latter, the goal is precisely to maximize this impact. While the policy maker must guard against the foolishness of the populace, active citizens struggle with the intransigence and irrelevance of the democratic structures above them. While policy makers insist groups be accountable, active citizens see accountability as something *government* must demonstrate *to them*. It is this growing separation that must be addressed if we are to effectively deepen democracy.

The position of the enquirer in part determines what can be seen. This is a perceptual separation, a divergence in the way knowledge is constructed. It is thus also cognitive, as it pertains to how we process information. Indeed, this separation comes about because meaning is constructed in different

ways in different organizational contexts. Participation *really* does look the way it does from each perspective. Or better, each perspective gazes upon a differently constructed object. From both sides, it is hard to see out. At its most advanced, this separation of realities debilitates both policy maker and citizen, for while the former succumbs to corruption by power, the latter learns apathy and helplessness.

History shows that cognitive separation in hierarchic organizations is an inescapable and progressive process. It begins upon the assumption of power and, when unchecked, runs to its inevitable and self-destructive conclusion.

How, then, can well intentioned policy makers address this cognitive separation and work effectively to increase participation? How can we overcome the limitations in our perception of participation, and learn to acknowledge and manage this weakness pragmatically? If the wisdom of Socrates was based on his knowledge that he knew nothing, then we are, at this point, particularly well placed. For all our academic study, practical experimentation, think-tank papers and empirical research, we really know very little about political participation. We know still less about why citizens engage in politics and how participation can be organized effectively. In this, we are just like the first representative democrats, such as Locke, Mill and Madison. They accepted the limits of their knowledge, knew they did not know the 'good', and so took steps towards the pragmatic management of democratic state power. The result was a series of organizational innovations

that spruced up democracy and dragged it into the modern world. Among them were new structures for representative government, the division of powers, the separation of church and state and the balancing of an expanding franchise with effective decision-making at the centre.

In the face of our collective ignorance about political participation, and the increasingly visible process of cognitive separation that tends to occur between citizen and representative, we are restricted, as Walter Benjamin remarked, to 'managing the damage piece by piece.' What follows are ten possible pieces. All are aimed at the pragmatic management of participation in the light of growing cognitive separation. Some suggest policies which might provide practical assistance to participation where and when it occurs.

The list does not address pressing issues of economic and social inequality. One of the few things we *do* know about participation is that it is always deeply influenced by status. The fundamentally Liberal claim, that economic inequality does not translate into political inequality, is increasingly difficult to uphold in a world of media barons and corporate lobbying. In addition, recent work on deliberative democracy has shown that even when participation takes the form of open debate with other citizens, it risks merely replicating existing inequalities. Because of this, it may well be that New Labour's most important contribution to deepening democracy is, in fact, its raft of poverty reduction programmes. However, there is little point in here responding to the question 'what should we do to increase participation?' with a list of ten identical items, all saying, 'reduce economic and social inequality.'

Participation rises and falls. It wakens, blunders around loudly and then dozes off again. It does this in a variety of different groups, associations, places and communities. Some of the most difficult questions facing those who seek to deepen democracy within such sites concern how its vibrant parts can be nurtured and linked together into an effective organization. We do not yet know the answer to such questions, but we do know that many of the ways New Labour has so far addressed them have in fact *accelerated* the process of cognitive separation. We need new ideas, new ways of seeding, helping and linking small awakenings of democracy. Right now, these ideas are not coming from policy makers or academics, but from the margins of practical politics.

Ten pieces of reform:

- 1. Constitutional Reform:** A reduction in executive power and the enactment of promised constitutional and electoral reforms should be immediately, and loudly, pursued. Nothing so baldly illustrates the change in perception that occurs upon the assumption of power than New Labour's sudden incapacity to implement these reforms. Today, their aggressive pursuit would restate the party's commitment to democracy and signal a genuine attempt to bring the government's understanding of that term closer to that of the citizenry.
- 2. Respond to citizens:** The process of separation between citizen and representative is progressive and cognitive. It entails the gradual construction of two different worlds, and two different perceptions of participation. New Labour is now caught between wanting to awaken the giant, and fearing it. Participation here appears as something to be contained and channeled through traditional political institutions, and mistrusted, disciplined and ignored when it does not. The giant is always threatening to misbehave. Yet there is only one effective treatment for this cognitive distortion: more democracy. Indeed, one reason we benefit

from listening to different viewpoints is that they reveal what we could not previously see. New Labour needs to *prepare* itself to hear and respond to its citizens, and so, sometimes, to change its mind. Where the road confronts a cliff, there absolutely has to be a reverse gear. Leadership in a democracy should not pride itself on its unresponsiveness to the citizenry. Certainly, elected representatives must have a degree of autonomy in their decision-making, but so must they reflect the views of those they represent. There is no better way for this to occur, and for cognitive separation to be managed, than to listen and respond to the outcomes of citizen deliberation when it occurs.

- 3. Learn from the margin:** Government should watch, copy and learn from the margin of traditional political and community activity. Particularly at present, and perhaps always, the margin is a fruitful source of organizational innovation. There are important advances currently being made in new forms of participatory governance, new uses of information technology, alternative markets, community-based services and deliberative research. It is not the task of government to reach down and dictate what constitutes participation and how it is to be organized. Rather, it is to assist those trying to reach up, to learn from them and to enable.

- 4. Support democratic associations:** We should, therefore, be actively engaged in seeding, finding, nurturing and resourcing democratic initiatives across civil society. Far too many groups dedicated to participatory principles find themselves restricted by insufficient resources and the disciplinary attentions of government. There should be resources available to all such groups, irrespective of their representativeness, accountability, competence or intention. Any exclusion from such resources, for example, on grounds of hate speech, should itself be subject to extensive public deliberation, as this is an important question for democratic citizens. Payment should be provided for active participation of all types, and resources could include the ready availability of process management expertise and training, centrally coordinated and itself adequately resourced. There is room here for a Democracy Support Unit, which would fund organizational R&D, develop institutions for communication between citizen and representative, and supply associations with resources. The Unit would not give direction on what constitutes 'appropriate' participation but it would be briefed to enable citizens to educate themselves in real experiences of empowered participation and decision-making. There should be practice and rehearsal of all kinds of participation, from consultation, though education, to the actual making of decisions.

- 5. Issue 'Bureaucracy Waivers':** At present, wholly inadequate resources for democratic initiatives come with strings attached. Groups must demonstrate constitutional arrangements for representation and accountability, link their activities to government agendas and meet particular performance standards. These strings often kill off democratic initiatives before they get started, force groups to describe themselves in certain ways and generate internal organizational structures and outcomes that were not what the participants intended. This is death by audit. It is a form of unintended colonization, whereby democratic groups find their language and activity taken over by well-meaning and unreflective donors. Consequently, 'Bureaucracy Waiver' certificates should be issued to all groups in order to avoid such colonization. Government cannot demand of civil society groups that they be accountable. This is inverted accountability, and is properly a matter for associations themselves. Indeed, groups have far more effective ways of policing such matters than can be provided by any government. Accountability is *for government to the people*, and is not for civil society groups. Granting resources should include granting the freedom to fail, and to disappoint. Policy makers must overcome their growing inability to see new forms of democracy as legitimate, effective and deserving of their trust. Indeed, government should extend trust to the people if it seeks it in return.
- 6. Use tested innovations:** Radically extend the use of citizen's juries, selection by lot and rotation of office holders, stakeholding, advocacy and deliberative fora across all sites of decision-making. Create an office of Tribune of the People, as did the Roman Republic, with the power to insist the government listen to the people. The Tribunate was granted extensive powers of veto over policy. This was because both citizens and senate understood the need for institutional forms to ensure certain voices did not disappear. They knew these voices were required for good decision-making. Such an institution would constitute sound management of the growing separation between government and citizen.
- 7. Make democratic noise:** Politicians should stage, promote and resource informational, deliberative and decision-making events with all the energy shown in recent foreign policy initiatives. Every effort should be made to wake the giant, and reap the benefits of its attention.

- 8. Forget free-riders:** Whenever public resources are dispensed, there will be those who chose to reap the benefits without paying the costs. It is to be expected, therefore, that paying people to participate, and providing 'Bureaucracy Waivers' to civil associations upon the award of resources, will generate some free-riding. This must be entirely ignored. Under no circumstances should free-riders be allowed to drive government policy to deepen democracy. Indeed, it is extraordinary how New Labour has been gradually seduced into structuring policy and services to prevent free-riding, and the extent to which this has been allowed to distort the ethos of public service provision and inflate enforcement costs. In making more democracy, policies which are oriented primarily to the prevention of free-riding are particularly disenabling.
- 9. Work on the plumbing:** A central problem in the development of a more participatory democracy is that of organization. Unless the product of deliberations inside the associations of civil society have institutional arrangements for their coordination, they are reliant on network organizational forms to generate their viability. Further institutions are required for ongoing communication with government, for negotiation and public argumentation. Such institution-building would require accommodations and trade-offs, and ways of managing the divisions of labour and hierarchies that inevitably emerge. Yet the possibility of *less* hierarchy in our organizations remains a compelling one across both the private and public sectors. We should also note that institutional designs for a deeper democracy cannot be bequeathed from above. Instead, designing these new institutions would be an excellent place to start a more substantive debate about active citizenship.
- 10. Attempt to be cool:** A little more responsiveness to citizen interests is not the end of responsible leadership. A modicum of proper consultation does not threaten policy paralysis. A few misuses of public funds should not result in all the associations of civil society becoming objects of distrust. We need to move away from the perception of participation that sees it primarily as something requiring control. Such a perception is a distortion, an optical illusion deriving from our elevated perspective. Policy makers cannot see citizens, and citizens cannot see policy makers. This separation must be acknowledged and addressed. Otherwise, active citizenship will further withdraw its trust, increasingly run services and communities themselves and finally confront their representatives as enemies. Democracy is indeed a sleeping giant. When it wakes to discover it has been bound hand and foot, it will not be pleased. New Labour has good intentions on active citizenship and participation. Yet it will not succeed until it gives participants what they actually require: help, not discipline.