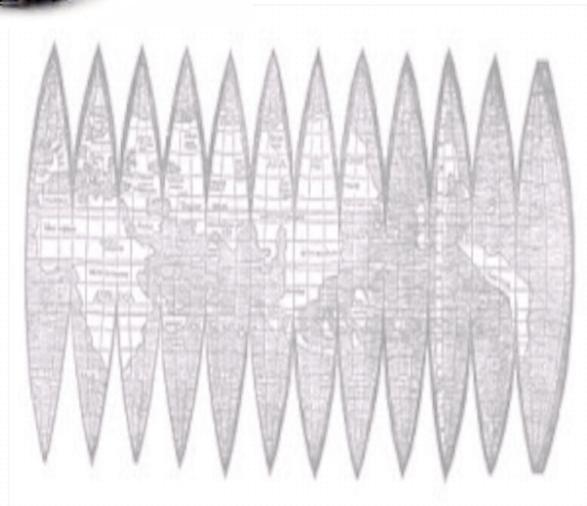


# ***The Democracy Device***



***Kit and Concepts for Field Operatives***

*Dr DR Blaug*

## Introduction: Using the Device

*The Democracy Device* is an imaginary object found near a desert hamlet in eastern Namibia. It was spotted in the sand by a young girl after a storm and decades later given to a doctor in the city. A palm-sized metallic sphere of considerable age and pitted finish, it is slightly larger than a tennis ball and surprisingly heavy. Though not immediately apparent, the *Device* is made up of nine finely milled detachable segments (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: The Democracy Device with Segment

Each Segment, (technically, 'spherical wedges') examines an aspect of democratic practice. The *Device* was designed to evoke dynamic, noisy and effective forms of democracy and to help democratic groups flourish in conditions of economic, political and social degeneration.

A cross between an *Army Field Manual*, an *Organisational Handbook* and perhaps the *I Ching Book of Changes*, the *Device* presents visual, conceptual and psychological aids for democratic operatives in the field. While fitting neatly in the hand, it was, at some point in the past, dropped, thus accounting for the sometimes-damaged insights evident in the *Device* today.

The *Device* draws on Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz for its mathematics, Niccolo Machiavelli for its ferocious populism, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's psychological method and Milton Erikson for the hypnotic inductions. The aim throughout is to act on the power politics of how we, as individuals, think and to better utilise the effects of institutional structures on how we, as collectives, make meaning. To this end, the *Device* combines psychology and politics to help make organisations more democratic.

Not untypical of *Emergency Tool Boxes* and *Prepper Survival Packs* of its day, the *Democracy Device* is notable for its celebration of democracy as a means of collective information management and perhaps also for its vociferous concern with the psychological effects of holding power over others. Throughout, the *Device's* nine segments question the competence of elites, stressing their restless desire for power and their willingness to destroy everything to defend it.

Democracy, as the philosopher Hilary Putnam observed, 'is the precondition for the full application of human intelligence to addressing social problems.' This damaged and archaic *Device* sought to provide practitioners with a battery of useful designs, craft knowledge, cognitive tweaks and organisational tools to shape the democratic hand that holds them.

*Dr D R Blaug ICC  
London UK, 2015*

## Device Segments

### 1. In Parallel

### 2. The Assembly & its Council

### 3. Representation to a Council

### The Device Was Designed to Wait

### 4. Talking & Deciding

### 5. Corruption & Rotation

### Falling

### 6. Democratic Leadership

### 7. Incoming from Society

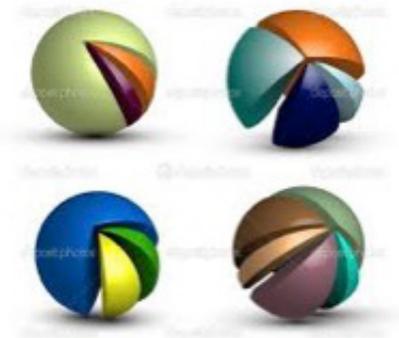
### 8. Outward from the Mind

### Working in the Trench

### 9. Tyranny as Teacher

### Afterword

### Sources



## Segment 1: In Parallel

Sometimes, institutions are so damaged, so clearly irrational – their purpose long since forgotten, their actual effects invisible to its members – that they *cannot* be reformed. Clogged by excessive hierarchy and bureaucratic ritual, they become defensive and wasteful so that at last their illegitimacy is naked and they are abandoned. Walking away from corrupt institutions means losing resources, but so does it free and force us to find other ways.



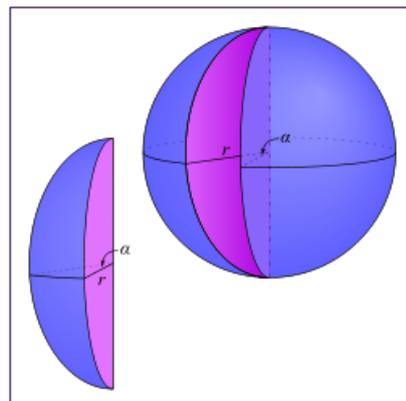
Of course, community and local organisations need and should receive the resources of the state and of transnational corporations, but neither will tolerate a deeper democracy oriented to the needs of the people. Creating resourceful, smart, parallel institutions that actually serve the public good enables us to practice the doing of politics and the making of collective decisions. This will eventually translate into alternative institutional forms.

Democratic arrangements and institutions are those that increase and preserve the public capacity to make decisions. To survive, such arrangements are regularly revisited and adjusted, re-enacted and celebrated. Held in the hand and puzzled over, organisational designs focus our attention on the ebb and flow of information and the collective construction of meaning. They are not blueprints but stimulants, helpful and heuristic.

One puzzle is what to do when institutions go awry. As we shall see throughout the *Democracy Device*, you can set up an Assembly of citizens and service it with a rotating and clever Council (Segment #2). You can move beyond representation (#3) and experiment with different forms of coordination and decision-making (#5). You can use these in your parallel institutions (#1), which will be set up when the state and the corporations finally withdraw entirely. Through democratic action we evoke our own abilities and reveal how deeply those with power despise and fear us.

## Segment 2: The Assembly & its Council

No political power can be *right* without an Assembly. As the sovereign body in a democracy, the people assembled become a collective engine for knowledge. The Assembly cements and celebrates the plural subject in the minds of individuals. It provides arbitration of decisions arrived at through other political institutions and all such institutions derive their legitimacy from the actual assent of the assembled populace. In effect, the Assembly consents to decisions its members have already made in other decision-making fora, organisations, groups and micropublics, and it pronounces, in public, on executive performance at the end of their period of service.



The Assembly is, therefore, simply a collection of such fora – here in one political and symbolic space. The power of this plural subject, at last arrayed in all its finery and excitement, is evident in its beneficial cognitive, informational, communicative and educational effects.

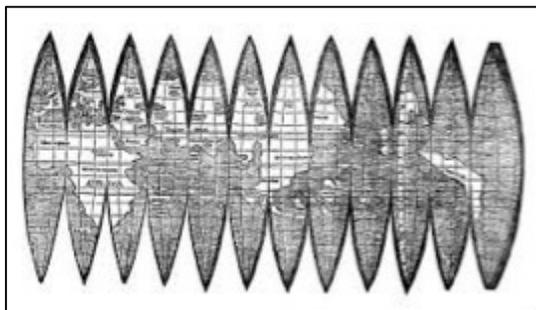
Largely a lost art, the ability to manage an Assembly of citizens is a central concern in a democracy. We show our lack of public experience when we gather together without organisation, when we use valuable public time to vent our own concerns, when we are bamboozled by elites pretending to ‘consult’ us, or when told that, for equality to be real, all must speak. The Assembly is not a space for the dogged bleating of private interests. To make it so is to reduce it to a bargaining hall where favors are bought and sold. It is far better conceived as a public place of argumentation.

For an Assembly to fulfill its knowledge-processing promise, it needs a Council. The Assembly is noisy, social and exciting. It is a space for the display of character and conflict. Without a Council to serve it, to organise its discussions, to filter its informational inputs and direct its agenda, the Assembly becomes a *Babel* of unproductivity and unacknowledged inequality, thus serving only to undermine citizen beliefs in the effectiveness of democracy. Citizen incapacity is then appealed to by ruling elites – always keen to claim their leadership as necessary.

The Council, with its informational functions of filtering, combination and alignment behind a decision, requires informed citizens that express the collective will of those they represent. If its knowledge management functions are taken over by elitist special interests, the Council serves to undermine democracy and manipulate the Assembly. By so usurping democratic power, especially when combined with the poor modes of representation common today, the Council becomes a cognitively separated executive body that blindly pursues the factional interests of powerholders. Without an Assembly to guide it, a Council is vulnerable to separation and sedimentation into a static and exclusionary political class. The Council, therefore, must be made constantly aware that it is subservient to the Assembly, and that the Assembly expects it to deliver certain kinds of information. This, indeed, is one of the main requirements of the Assembly: that it ratifies the filtering activities of the Council and ensures the Council acts legitimately in its name.

This connection between the Assembly and the Council is long gone. We have a separate political class. Elites know how important it is to deny citizens any public space in which to practice managing an Assembly. Yet politics in the ancient republics was characterised by huge Assemblies, the mere contemplation of which assists our current understanding of how to make decisions that affect us all.

## Section 3: Representation to a Council



The composition of Councils is usually by representation. Most modern councils have no Assembly. They thus rule without legitimacy and are always open to challenge. Such denuded councils see representation as choosing – by simplistic vote – a person to make decisions for you. Such representatives do not carry the citizenry's direct instructions, but are expected to use their own judgment, moral character and technocratic

expertise to promote the common interest. What in fact occurs is that they lose any understanding of those they represent. They become separate from them, coming at last to inhabit different worlds. Representation is a division of political labour into leader and follower.

The primary (information processing) purpose of representation is one of simplification, here in order to make executive decisions. To achieve this, representation harvests individual citizen preferences and aggregates them into a 'social choice' – through political parties, policy bundles and (inescapably value-laden) electoral systems. The information that arrives in the Council of decision-makers is thus a simplification of the collective will, shorn of its complex synergies and starved of the deliberative exploration, aggregation and alignment offered by a more genuinely democratic council. Representation is a filter, one that sacrifices the quality of public decision-making so as to enable an elite few to make decisions.

Representation also serves to gather and centralise the technical expertise required for coherent policymaking. When over-simplification and a complete division of political labour are combined – as they are in our stunted liberal democracy – they empower an elite group is corrupted by power to serve its own ends. Citizens are then manipulated in elections, ignored between elections and denied the educative effects of deliberation. Now they find themselves facing an isolated and entrenched political elite, one that devalues citizen capacities and withholds technical expertise.

In this way, representation acts powerfully *against* democracy. It leaks legitimacy, makes bad (unresponsive) policies and refuses public accountability. Representation is thus a treatment for information overload that degenerates into information paucity.

Politics is not a science. Political knowledge is not out there as an object of expertise. Communities must *talk* possibilities into existence. Leadership is not by privilege and technical expertise is always available from specialists. Just as an expert witness assists the jury in a court, so can they assist ordinary citizens in their exercise of political will. Representation should, therefore, only ever be a minor technique for insuring that certain otherwise-invisible voices are heard by the Council.

Rule by isolated representatives constrained by law is better than tyranny. But it remains a simplification too far. Choosing a representative cedes control of one's life to another. In our current representative system, the processes by which individual preferences are filtered, shorn and mangled into a social choice entail a massive loss of knowledge. Councils without Assemblies composed of elected representatives thus evince a strong tendency towards separation, dehumanisation, corruption and a blind orientation to their own interests. Yet if not the elected, who is on the Council?

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## Device Will Wait

Inter-word

The young Namibian girl could find no way to raise the money to hire a doctor for her ailing father and so had been weeping when she saw the *Democracy Device* protruding from the sand. The dull metal caught her eye and she brushed it off and thought quickly, her heart racing. She tried to sell it to a soldier, but he merely delayed her, laughing, so that by the time she returned home, her father was dead. She stared down at his body and then at the *Device* in her hand, resolving never, ever, to meet such an end herself. No one should suffer for want of simple medical assistance. And so she scraped an education and left for the city as soon as she could. The city was frightening and overwhelming and then sometimes strangely quiet. She rented a small cheap room, putting the *Device* in the back of a sticky cedar drawer, perhaps to be taken out at some bittersweet time when remembering, with slow tears before the fire, the warmth of her father.

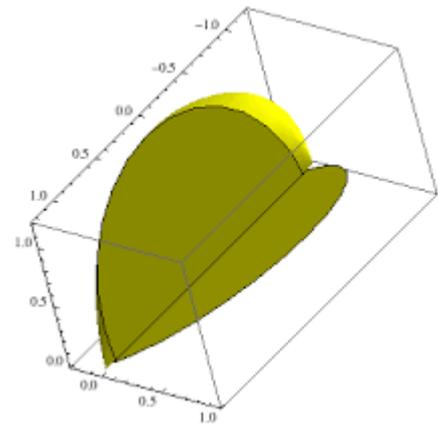
The *Device* was designed to wait.

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## Device Segment 4: Talking & Deciding

Public discussion gathers information from diverse individuals and publics. Yet to make a decision, that flow of information must be reduced. To decide is to sift, parse and select. Decision-making is a 'bottleneck' of collective information-processing, one that inevitably requires a loss of information.

Most collective decisions are made without adequate deliberation and are harried by voices that demand an end to talk. Decisions then ignore what little deliberation there was and immediately cut through its complexity with voting and majority decision rules. As a result, citizens are consulted without effect, made resentful and excluded. Certainly, to pass through the 'bottleneck of making a decision' requires procedural rules. Whether consensual, dissensual or a mixture of both, such rules must themselves be agreed upon, revisited and adjusted. There is no other source of legitimacy.



A time for deliberation – as much as can be afforded.

A time for decision-making.

Sometimes there is no time at all.

Before the emergency occurs, prearranged procedures for rapid information processing must be put in place, and again and again living and revisited. While a perfect democracy 'takes too many meetings', perfect authoritarianism has no meetings at all. Somewhere in between is a citizenry that deliberates when they can and decides when they must. If this requires leadership, it must be time-bound, rotated and afterwards, held to account.

Did the leader obey the people?

"Who among you has voice to give?"

## Device Segment 5: Corruption & Rotation

Councils without assemblies and staffed by representatives naturally become oriented to their own collective interest. The division of political labour embodied by such councils results in a concentration of knowledge among the few and its denial to the many.

Practice makes perfect elitism. It stimulates the council's contempt for the people and teaches citizens to be fools. It is for this reason that no council can be sovereign, all are subordinate to an Assembly and Council membership is widely shared.

Council members are not isolated representatives but are, instead, ever changing delegates, selected from other fora by processes of rotation and lottery. Randomly chosen, all have their time as council members. In this way, citizens learn to participate effectively and to carry the preferences of the fora from which they come. Where such a Council requires specialist knowledge, they request it. Where a Council requires the filtering of information to enable decision-making, they learn to deliver it – after which they return to their respective fora with an account of how they did so.

By spreading the role of Council membership (as with a jury), rotational lotteries and random selection enable collective decision-making to benefit from the expertise of ordinary citizens. It repeatedly demands that citizens improve their capacity for self-rule, agree to actions taken in their name and share their council experience with others. This wider dispersal of political expertise not only prevents the development of a static, privileged and corrupted political class (as we currently endure); it also educates the citizenry and garners information from diverse micro and counter publics. If one of the great tragedies of the stunted Western electoral democracies is that they waste the knowledge of ordinary citizens, rotation and lottery ensure continued responsiveness, adaptability and resilience. You should rule sometimes, and by chance.

In the ancient Republics, one criterion for judging the quality of political decisions was the degree to which they preserved the ability to make future political decisions. Where citizens practice self-rule, and the division of political labour is broken down, they become valuable resources for their polity. This is proven by the hatred and contempt shown them by our receding democratic elite.

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## Falling

Inter-word

Time passed and the rapidly changing world made a new normal; the old forgotten. Gone was the safety of everyday life in the city. All grew to fear each other. The Namibian girl who found the Democracy Device became a mother.

During this time, the Government of Military and National Unity used their superior technology to develop innovative forms of suffering, exquisitely measured and celebrated, taken deep into the fragmenting self. Blindly obedient followers built sleek and exclusive ghettos for their genetic superiors. In return, they received the comfort of having their frustrations directed at an arbitrary minority, their hatred carefully stimulated.

With the poor, the sick, the non-white and the critics outside the ghetto walls, those inside lived in electronic terror of ejection. Opposing a superior was punishable in this way, as was debt, criticism, curiosity or any attempt to remove the many digital sensors in the body. Merely to point at the new normal could result in exile.

The Namibian woman tried to hide her son's illness, but doctors cost money, as did technical assistance, education, dentistry, security and digital membership. Any falling behind meant exclusion. When the computers finally picked up the boy's sickness, the family could not afford to save him and he was euthanised. They gave thanks in public, as all were required to do, but it is not clear that her husband ever overcame this loss. She worked unceasingly to help him keep up the appearance of obedience, but sometimes when he wept quietly, she resented his self-indulgence. She had to survive, had done so in the past and would do so again. Working harder, keeping quieter, asking less for herself, she did not countenance failure. And yet there were moments of tenderness between them, ordinary, warm and valuable.

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## Device Segment 6: Democratic Leadership

Leadership is necessary – less than is claimed by leaders, but more than is imagined by those among us who have learned suspicion. The realities of individual differences, of divisions of labour and pressures of time – all require this simplification. Leaders must then be closely watched and controlled.

Democratic leaders work for their publics and use their power as a lever to democratise organisations.

Democracy is for fighting units and front-line workers whose institutions lose their responsiveness to user needs and actively prevent them from doing their work. Organisational democracy has been shown to operate effectively in rough terrain, amid stuck institutions with primitive conceptions of leadership and undermined by cynical calls for public empowerment. Such forms of leadership hold to the following proposition:

**P1 Democracy is the most ethical, legitimate, effective, productive, adaptable, efficient and sustainable organisational form.**

This informs a series of practical management orientations that have no alliterative acronym at all, but do point us towards:

Actively seeding, creating, facilitating and listening to public discussions.

Seeing themselves as intermediaries, rather than barriers, between institutions and their publics.

To *politicise* public decision-making and do so in a democratic way.

Designing and adapting organisational structures to refine, listen and respond to the preferences of their publics,

To provide and resource Assemblies and Councils using rotation and random selection.

In addition, democratic leadership upholds:

**P2 Policy decisions must preserve the future democratic capacity to make public decisions.**

Here again unpacked:

Encouraging others to contribute their invaluable and often unexpected points of view.

Stepping back to allow laypeople to take responsibility, sharing tasks and power.

It's not about you. It's about them.

Use your democracy to energise and undermine moribund, hierarchic and bureaucratised institutions from within. Use parallelism alongside.

Convene assemblies and work together to open spaces for informed public discussion, providing information and recruiting expertise as required.

Resist the replacement of discursive spaces by a mistrustful and biased bureaucracy.

Be aware that your thoughts are not entirely your own. Power has 'outposts in the head.' Do not believe everything you think. Worry about your soul.

Note that institutions abuse people and then make that suffering invisible. It is for this reason that the worst thing most of us ever do is to go along with inadvertent oppression – at best committing crimes of obedience, at worst, basing our very selves upon doing so.

As agents of change, democratic leaders glance knowingly at each other in the hall. They need tech, marketing, law, political philosophy and art. Able to control their cognition and modify even their autonomic responses, they get ready for the mass refusals to come.

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## Device Segment 7: Incoming from Society

The thick mélange of material and symbols in which we live has its own logic, somehow raging independently of us – even though we created it. Like the surface of the sun, our own imaginings flare out towards us, approaching menacingly from outside.

At the very height of civilization, life changed, work got harder, faster, with more checks and tests and bureaucracy and performance indicators. Everyone was suspect. All were commodities. Information was something that gave competitive advantage. Attention was monetorised.

As if through a puncture – this will be of no surprise – meaning drained from the world. So much lying and advertising, spin, ‘choice architecture’ and ‘genuine fakery’ made “words lose their meaning.” Thucydides said this was what destroyed the ancient Greek world and it happened again with us. We tore up communities and, in our institutional life, gagged on a foaming fantasy of administration. Many dedicated their entire working lives to these convoluted figments, to the dumb calculation of cartoon measurements and absurd, childlike, metrics.



Learning to appear to be busy, to uphold *and believe* the values of the institution, to appear to give value, to have been trained, to meet standards. With breath-taking gullibility, we wandered into believing our public institutions and profit-chasing companies were trying to provide goods and services, whereas in truth, their cloying mission statements concealed a world of abject dysfunction, primitive hierarchic behaviour and wasted knowledge. The orientation to appearances drilled a fundamentally defensive cognitive posture, one forever in fear of attack by the media or the overly litigious. This was ‘audit culture’, swamped by ‘rituals of verification.’ This was the solar flare that came at us from the world outside – a social process independent of our beliefs. One no longer ‘looked after Grandma’, but instead generated units of ‘social care.’ One did not teach, but met ‘learning objectives’. What had been coordinated by talking and trust was thereby ‘colonised’ by administration.

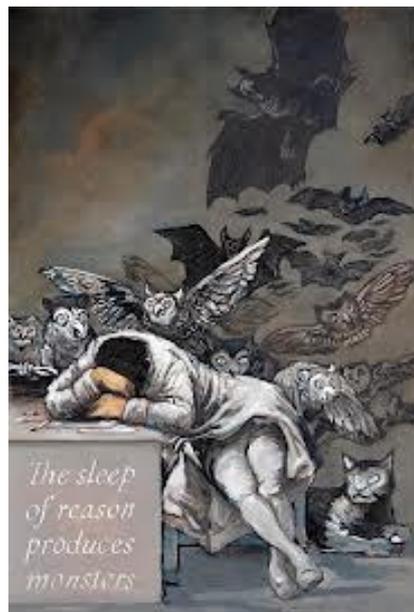
That foam, though, yellow and sticky and sprayed down the throat by soldiers; that froth of administration, whipped up as real: it shows how institutions can slip so easily into sleep, drifting in small steps to at last emerge, blinking, far from their core purposes, vulnerable and bloody.

Privileged enclaves, isolated, entitled, cognitively sealed but also defensive and fearful. Dysfunctional institutions increasingly laid bare; we peered in, shocked to see that our ruling elites were no match for the global risks to come. Their primary purpose, to secure the safety of citizens, was finally replaced by the simple urge to save themselves.

## Device Segment 8: Outward From the Mind

A ring of cages with doors opening into a central common area, each has a monkey inside. A banana is dropped into the central area. The monkeys rush towards it, but all are doused immediately with cold water. Dripping and miserable, they slouch back to their individual cages. They soon learn that any movement by any monkey towards the dropped banana causes all the monkeys to be soaked. So now they stay still when the banana drops. They implore one another with eyes and signals and chattering voices: do not move towards that banana. Do not do anything at all.

Take one monkey away and replace it with another. The new monkey knows nothing of the collective danger of being doused. The banana drops and all are watching. The new monkey jumps forward, surprised that his peers do not do the same, not understanding their desperate shouts and gestures. He rushes back into his cage, confused and frightened, narrowly avoiding a soaking for them all. But soon he becomes used to keeping still and shouting with the others to leave the banana alone. This is tradition.



Is it the 'sleep' of reason that 'produces monsters'  
or the 'dream' of reason?

Replace another monkey. Then another. Each in turn learns to discipline the new arrivals. Each learns to enforce the ban on lunging forward, even though none have ever experienced the dousing. When the banana drops, they stay completely still. They discipline each other. They pull this ban against movement deep into themselves so it is part of them. This is religion, whether of God or Money.

A banana drops. Two monkeys look at one another and start to edge forward, ignoring the hissing and gesturing and encouraging each other to take that final step, now emerging into the central area. They eat the banana. The others fall silent, at last moving gingerly from their cages.

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## Working in the Trench

Inter-word

Each morning she awoke, blinking, then padding bare feet across the floor to light the heater. She made tea, woke the children, did what was needed. At the Health Centre, she answered phones, dressed wounds, took details, but mostly just listened to the sick. Sometimes she swept her hair from her face and let out a long soft breath. Then back to work.



You can read a society by its attitude to those who are ill and in pain. The girl who had discovered the Democracy Device, now a woman, worked against her society: organising food for the poor, trying – in her daily interactions – to alleviate their suffering. She gazed out over the lines of people waiting, listening to their coughing and soft weeping, the claspings of clothes against the cold, their breaths like white cones in the still air.

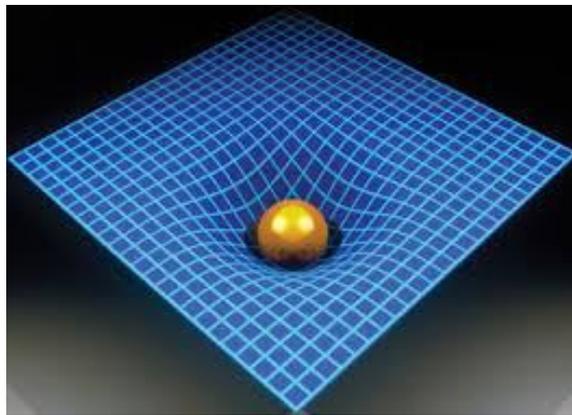
Those who hold power always say: 'Everything's fine. It's fine. Everything's fine. Everything's fine. Everything's fine. If you say otherwise, you will be worked on. Everything's fine. Everything's fine. If you have a problem with your healthcare, you are mistaken. If you have pain in your arm, you do not have pain in your arm. Everything's fine. Honest. It's fine.'

## Device Segment 9: Tyranny as Teacher

You cannot *order* someone to be spontaneous – not if you want to make sense. When a state or corporation or institution tries to make people think in a certain way, it usually fails. Yet often, there are other more perverse outcomes: all unacknowledged intentions at last reveal themselves in action. Institutions may be laughable in their efforts to purposefully invade our thinking, but they are very good at doing it by accident.

Nothing breeds democracy so well as the experience of injustice. Undeserved privilege, casual cruelty and tyranny are the teachers of democracy.

There may be no other way to learn.



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## Afterword

Night school, the free health clinic and her family filled the years so smoothly. She loved her children, they became adults and she was suddenly older.

Near the end, she walked each morning with small steps among the trees, thinking of her Namibian desert home. Eventually she fell. For a night and a day she lay buckled on the cold floor. When the doctor finally came, he found an old woman, hysterical, shouting and demanding a particular cedar drawer be brought to her without delay. He found the drawer and as instructed, pulled it out and handed it to her. She rummaged and then, triumphant, produced the dull metallic sphere of the *Democracy Device*. The doctor could not make out her words and grew alarmed when she brandished the *Device*, clearly imagining she could use it to pay for medical help.

Running our own parallel institutions, using Assemblies that use Councils, minimising representation, talking, deciding, avoiding corruption, rotating offices and random selection, practicing democratic leadership among polluted institutions, running with a teeming mind beneath the tyranny, we work and wait.

The *Democracy Device* subsequently reappeared in a charity shop in the North London neighbourhood of Barnet, labeled merely 'Shot'.

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