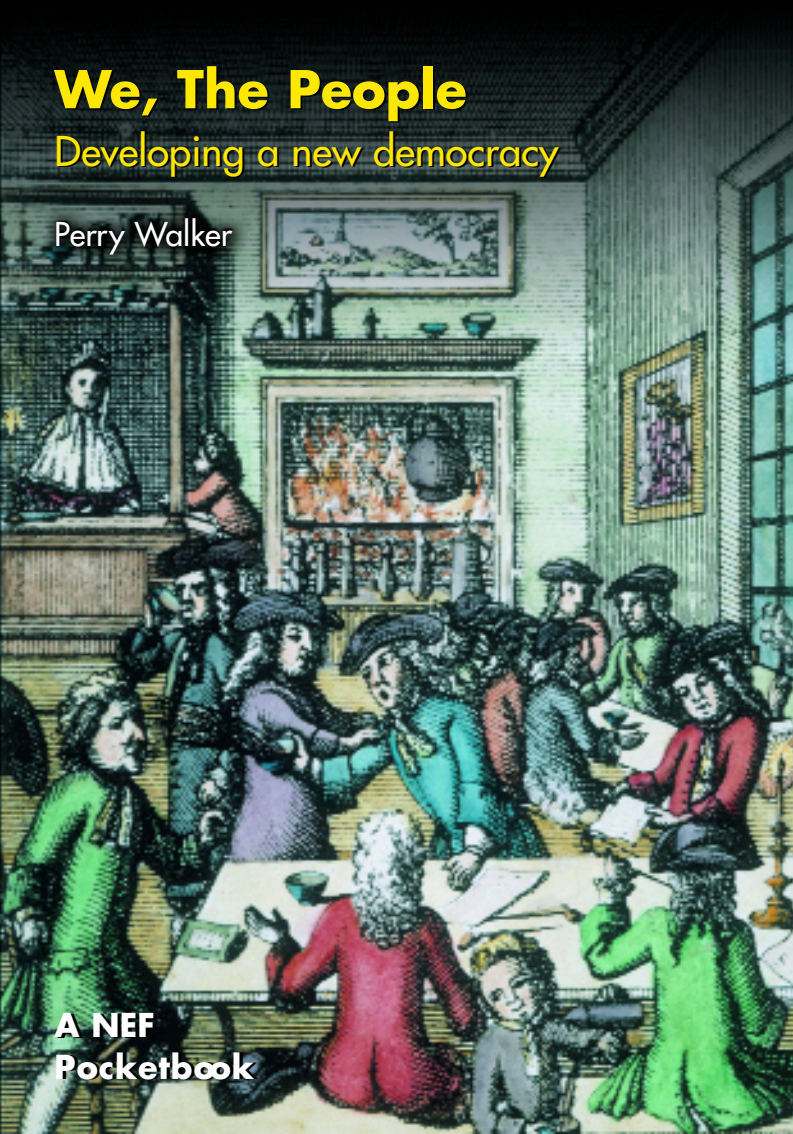
We, The People

Developing a new democracy

Perry Walker



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Cover Picture: Coffee house "democracy" in the 18th century (engraving by an unknown artist, c.1700 – Mary Evans Picture Library).

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Introduction

Democracy, the American political philosopher John Dewey remarked on his ninetieth birthday, "begins in conversation". When, in 1999, Bill Clinton suggested that the World Trade Organisation invite the protesters in Seattle to the talks, rather than use the police to keep them out, there was no format he could propose in which both sides would have felt safe. The agreed conventions did not exist – so no conversation could take place.

This pocketbook is for everyone who feels frustrated with the state of people's participation in local and national affairs. Voters feel alienated from the political process – mistrustful of the political establishment, cynical about those who are supposed to represent them, deeply pessimistic about their capacity to have any influence. In a study of public perceptions of local government published by Lancashire County Council in 1995, the authors concluded: "The experience [of participants in the focus groups] was of institutions which did not listen, did not care about them individually, and against whom one had to wage battle to create any impression".

Edmund Burke has much to answer for. In his famous speech to the electors of Bristol in 1774, he declared: "Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he

sacrifices it to your opinion". Such sophistry has contributed to a highly passive notion of representation. MPs and councillors tend to think their job is to take decisions – to act as "leaders" – rather than to instigate the processes through which citizens can contribute their knowledge and experience and have their say.

Many of us feel doubly frustrated, because there is so much recognition of the need for participation and yet so little good practice. What we do have is some hard experience of where democracy is failing. We can also cite many examples of fresh approaches – ideas and initiatives that hold within them the promise of rejuvenating democracy. This pocketbook looks at both – the failures and the successes. It builds on both to suggest ways in which participatory democracy can become something more than an empty catchphrase.

Ultimately, however, some hard choices may face us. We don't like the democracy we have got, it seems – but at least it doesn't require too much effort. Hurling insults at over-familiar faces on the television screen may be preferable, for some, to the demands of a public meeting on a cold winter night. Writers such as John Ralston Saul see a deeper conflict in this. "The virtue of certainty is not a comfortable idea," he writes in his book, *The Unconscious Civilisation*, "but then a citizen-based democracy is based on participation, which is the very expression of permanent discomfort". By contrast, what Saul describes as the "corporatist system" depends upon "the citizen's desire for inner comfort".

Are we ruled by ideas – indeed, ideals – of citizenship or by economics and the manipulation of markets? Do we want to remain cynical – but comfortable – consumers rather than active participants in the decisions that govern our lives? Saul's conclusion is that reality involves "acceptance of permanent psychic discomfort… And the acceptance of psychic discomfort is the acceptance of consciousness".

1 The State Democracy's In

In ancient Athens, democracy directly involved large numbers of those eligible, the free men. The Greeks thought economics was for women – *eco* comes from *oikos*, meaning "household" – and politics was for men. Public officials were chosen by lot from among the citizens. Socrates was tried by a jury of 501 selected in this way. A quarter of free male adults served as president of the Athenian republic for 24 hours. This system has been held up as an ideal throughout history, but was condemned as unworkable for the much larger nation states that developed in Europe from the Renaissance onwards.

Democracy became feasible again when it was linked with the idea of representation. This had, in its origins, nothing to do with ideals – Edward I summoned a parliament because he needed agreement to taxation. However, representation, when added to the more direct Greek notion of democracy, was seen as the answer to the problem of scale. One 18th century French writer described it as "democracy rendered practicable over a great extent of territory". In 1822 John Stuart Mill called it "the grand discovery of modern times".

Over time, the flaws in this grand discovery have appeared, as they do with any novelty. First, the problem of scale re-emerged. The average constituency is over 10 times the

size it was in 1790. Not surprisingly, our representatives find it difficult to represent us. This is exacerbated by the culture all elites develop, which further distances them from the people. Peter Mandelson wrote that after September 11, "those of us who made our living by thinking and acting on behalf of others would come into our own". This is clearly a very different view of politics from that which wants to help others to think and act on their own behalf.

The stories such distance produces are both comic and sad. Epsom and Ewell Council described "eco-warrior" Matthew Williams – precisely 11 years old at the time – as "a political extremist openly out to promote world revolution". A newspaper poll found that fewer than one in 20 people could explain the current Labour government's Third Way. Some thought it was a religious cult, others a sexual position; one man asked if it was a plan to widen the M25. In 1990 Danish Prime Minister Schluter, Conservative leader of a minority coalition government since 1982, was about to fight his fourth general election. A banker told him: "I'm convinced all thinking persons will vote for you." Schluter replied: "But that's not enough… I need a majority".

Politics and corruption have, for many people, become almost synonymous. So have politics and insincerity, or politics and manipulation. According to the commentator Darcus Howe, "this new breed [Blair, Brown, Thatcher] are not really at ease with the idea of government. And that's why we've had so much either authoritarianism or control-

freakery; none of them actually trusts the people they're meant to represent".

All this has reduced the legitimacy of representative government. In Europe membership of political parties has fallen by nearly 50 per cent over the last 15 years. In 1998 turnout at local elections in England was 29 per cent , down from 45 per cent four years previously. Nearly 70 per cent of young people in the UK, polls show, have no interest in local politics. Many commentators have pointed out that fewer people voted in the last general election than in the television show *Pop Idol*.

People feel alienated because they "are forever subjected to others' designs and reduced to data in others' programmes", wrote the American academic Jeff Lustig. "They rarely feel themselves the authors of their own lives." According to John Routledge of Urban Forum, an umbrella body for community groups, "politics is the art of preventing people from taking part in affairs that concern them". Linda Ryan Nye, campaigning on gender equality in the Canadian constitution in the 1980s, spoke of "the kind of pain you feel when you find out you're invisible".

This alienation leads to periodic violence, directed against a state which is seen as an external agency, a coercive force. Larry Siedentop, author of *Democracy in Europe*, remarks: "The way that the French police sometimes stand aside from illegal action amounts almost to a ritualised

recognition by the State that periodic violence is a condition of its survival in such a centralised form".

If distance and alienation make up the first flaw in our system, the second is the prevalence of polarised debate rather than constructive dialogue. According to the Public Conversations Project, based in the US state of Massachusetts, which seeks to promote dialogue on divisive public issues, some controversies "become defined by opposing views that cluster around two seemingly irreconcilable poles. A line [is drawn] between two simple answers to a complex dilemma and induces people to take a stand on one side of that line or the other. (For example, you are either a royalist or a revolutionary.) Most people who care deeply about the issue yield to this induction.

"Being aligned with one group offers benefits. It gives one a socially validated place to stand while speaking and it offers the unswerving support of like-minded people. It also exacts costs. It portrays opponents as a single-minded and malevolent gang. In the face of such frightening and unified adversaries, one's own group must be unified, strong and certain. To be loyal to that group, one must suppress many uncertainties, morally complicated personal experiences, inner value conflicts and differences between oneself and one's allies. Complexity and authenticity are sacrificed to the demands of presenting a unified front to the opponent. A dominant discourse of antagonism is self-perpetuating. Win-lose exchanges create losers who feel they must retaliate to regain lost respect, integrity, and security, and winners who fear to lose disputed territory won at great cost."

Typical of such polarisation was the dispute over emission standards at an arsenic plant in Washington State, USA. The headline in the local paper read: "Tacoma Gets Choice: Cancer Risk or Lost Jobs". Yet Pete Emerson, director of the De Borda Institute and author of *Consensus Voting Systems*, has demonstrated how artificial such black-or-white choices are in relation to Northern Ireland:

"There are many who say that Northern Ireland must be either a part of the United Kingdom, or part of a United Ireland, [implying] if not stating that the first proposal mutually excludes the second. Yet would it not be better to put the question in a different way, like this: a six- or nine-county Northern Ireland could be administered by, devolved within, federated with, independent of, or integrated into (the nations of) Britain and/or (the Provinces of) Ireland. That's at least ten proposals already, and not one of them mutually excludes the other nine. There's much in common, for instance, between a UK-type devolution and a United Ireland-type federation, and it's called a semi-autonomous Northern Ireland!"

The third flaw in our system of representative government is a consequence of the first two. We – the people – are so far removed from the political system that we do not get the opportunities to form our opinions properly. As a result, what our representatives represent is not our opinions but our interests.

In the era of opinion polls, this may seem a strange conclusion. As long ago as 1888 James Bryce MP was categorising the American political system as "government

by public opinion". This approach to government took a major step forward in 1936, when George Gallup, on the basis of a representative sample of a few thousand people, forecast that Franklin D. Roosevelt would become President. *The Literary Digest* scorned him beforehand, predicting a win for Alf Landon on the basis of millions of responses – which were unrepresentative.

However, the value of such polls depends on the value of the opinions. The theory of rational ignorance says that when any individual has little influence, it makes perfect sense not to spend time learning about an issue and forming views upon it. In these circumstances, the value of opinion polls as an instrument of democracy is undermined. It is solely the act of polling that creates the opinion – polls are thus an appropriate expression of a passive, alienated democracy. As the writer V. O. Key puts it, "the voice of the people is but an echo". One US poll showed that a third of adults had views on the Public Affairs Act of 1975. There is no Public Affairs Act of 1975.

Polling as usually practised reinforces this and/or approach to decisions. In the 1994 US election there was an overheated debate on health-care reform. Opinion polls showed widespread support for conflicting goals, summarised as: "One, lower my premiums. Two, cover the uninsured. Last, solve the nation's cost problem." When confronted with details about how the uninsured were to be covered or how costs were to be contained, the support for these options changed markedly.

The political process, it seems, only rarely informs or refines opinions. American academic Pippa Norris found that during the 1997 British election campaign, "knowledge about where the parties stood on a range of policy issues did not increase during the long British campaign despite the wall-to-wall coverage in the media and politicians' efforts to publicise their manifestos". The political thinker Hannah Arendt summarised this trenchantly:

"Opinions are formed in a process of open discussion and public debate, and where no opportunity for the forming of opinion exists, there may be moods – moods of the masses and moods of individuals, the latter no less fickle and unreliable than the former – but no opinion".

Against such a background, politicians represent our interests, not our opinions. Concludes Arendt:

"Through pressure groups, lobbies, and other devices, the voters can indeed influence the actions of their representatives with respect to interest, that is, they can force their representatives to execute their wishes at the expense of the wishes and interests of other groups of voters. In all these instances the voter acts out of concern with his private life and well-being, and the residue of power he still holds in his hands resembles rather the reckless coercion with which a blackmailer forces his victim into obedience than the power that arises out of joint action and joint deliberation."

2 Participation Matters

Where do we draw the boundaries between public and private? The second half of the 20th century, many would argue, witnessed the privatisation of happiness – and a consequent turning away from the public realm. As charted in *The Century of the Self*, the BBC series exploring the legacy of Freud, American radicals of the 1960s and 1970s found the State a tougher nut to crack than they had expected. So they turned from taking on external authority to tackling internalised repression – "the cop in the head". From this came the fashion for EST, encounter groups and the like.

But with a shift in means came a shift in ends. These radicals came to believe that to be happy they needed only to sort themselves out. They did not need to deal with the State. At times it appeared as if they did not either need to deal with other people. The legacy of this development is seen all over the western world, notably in the commoditised and solipsistic universe of advertising.

Throughout most of history, such attitudes would have seemed bizarre. Partly this reflects a sense of duty. As Pericles, the Athenian orator, expressed it, "we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business: we say that he has no business here at all". Benjamin Barber endorses Pericles in his book,

Strong Democracy. "Human freedom", says Barber, "will be found not in caverns of private solitude but in the noisy assemblies where women and men meet daily as citizens and discover in each other's talk the consolation of a common humanity."

Other writers and thinkers have taken a similar line. Hannah Arendt describes how the American revolutionaries "discovered the 'public happiness' that derived from participating in the business of government, the visceral pleasure that led them to actions they had never expected from themselves; as they found in the 'public spirit' an expression of solidarity fundamentally different from that found in private affairs."

John Stuart Mill argued that it was "of supreme importance that all classes of the community should have much to do for themselves; that as great a demand should be made upon their intelligence and virtue as it is in any respect equal to; that the government should encourage them to manage as many as possible of their joint concerns by voluntary co-operation." Mill's reasoning was that a people "among whom there is no habit of spontaneous action for a collective interest – who look habitually to their government to command or prompt them in all matters of joint concern – have their faculties only half developed".

The great sociologist Durkheim pointed out other benefits. In a cohesive society with high participation, he said, "there is a constant interchange of ideas and feelings from all to

each and each to all, something like a mutual moral support, which instead of throwing the individual on his own resources, leads him to share in the collective energy and supports his own when exhausted".

What is partly at issue here are different senses of what it is to be human and what it is to be happy. Many modern voters, reared in a culture that sets a high value on the satisfaction of material "needs" and consumerist aspirations, might find some of the views expressed above too exacting. Freedom, we tend to believe nowadays, means freedom to be private as well as to be public. Equally, to live a purely private life is to tip the balance the other way. What is not in doubt, however, is the sense of empowerment that comes from a greater participation in political processes.

The most striking statistical evidence for the value of participation comes from Switzerland. Two academics, Bruno Frey and Alois Stutzer, classified all the cantons on a six-point scale according to how participative they were. Cantons vary, for example, in the number of signatures they require to launch a referendum. Frey and Stutzer then asked 6,000 Swiss residents how satisfied they were with their lives.

Their study found that a one-point increase in residents' participation scale increased the proportion of those who said they were very happy by 2.7 per cent. To give some idea of the significance of this effect, it is nearly half as big

as that involved in moving from the lowest income band – around £11,000 a year – to the highest – £80,000 and upwards.

Frey and Stutzer were able to test whether greater happiness from higher participation was due to the outcome – better government – or to the process. Foreigners resident in Switzerland, for example, enjoy the outcomes but are not allowed to take part in the process. In fact, foreigners' happiness resulting from better government rose by only one-third as much as the increase for Swiss nationals. The findings thus clearly suggest that two-thirds of the benefits lie in the process – in the act of participation.

As described in Chapter 4, many of the new approaches to democracy involve getting people to consider issues in greater depth before coming to a decision. These new deliberative methods have thrown up an impressive body of anecdotal evidence on how participation in them widens people's horizons. Individuals who have taken part in several of the US National Issues Forums say that they start listening to the news more and in a different way, looking for options and their consequences. They also become more involved in civic activities – deliberation seems to get people to take the first step to civic involvement. The vast majority of participants – 96 per cent – in the Choices method, also described in Chapter 4, said that as a result they would either look for similar discussions, read more or become more involved in civic affairs. Many said they would do all three.

James Fishkin, the American political scientist who invented the "deliberative poll", was present at the first one ever held, in Manchester in 1994 under the auspices of Granada Television and *The Independent* newspaper He recalled later:

"A woman came up to me and said that during 30 years of marriage, her husband had never read a newspaper but that from the moment he had been invited to this weekend, he had changed. Not only did he read every bit of our briefing materials, but he now read 'every newspaper every day'." The woman speculated that her husband "would be much more interesting to live with in retirement".

In another deliberative poll, the proportion of the participants agreeing strongly with the statement "I have opinions about politics that are worth listening to" rose from 40 per cent at the start to 68 per cent at the finish.

Another important development in democracy, also discussed in Chapter 4, is the citizens' jury – 16 "ordinary" representatives of the community who spend four days taking evidence from experts before drawing up their conclusions. Experiences from citizens' juries in Britain have been summed up by the King's Fund in its book *Ordinary Wisdom* and they provide some moving accounts from participants.

Comments ranged from simple expressions of empowerment and self-confidence – "I feel more confident to take part in community issues and disputes", "I have more care of health authority issues now, and feel a better person for this" – to

greater commitment and civic involvement. One participant said: "I would like to contribute more now in community matters". Others clearly found the process life-enhancing. "I will never forget the experience", one wrote. Another declared: "You don't just walk away from a citizens' jury – it changes your life".

Deliberative polls also seem to make people more tolerant. "At the beginning of one small group discussion on the family", an account of one poll runs, "an 84-year-old conservative from Arizona expressed the view that 'a family' required that there be both a mother and a father in the home. He spent three days in dialogue as part of a group that included a 41-year-old woman who had raised two children as a single parent. At the end of the weekend he went up to her and asked what three words in the English language 'can define a person's character'. He answered his own question with the words: 'I was wrong'".

One benefit is the reduction in stereotyping when people come together in a setting where it is safe to explore their differences. Future Search conferences bring around 64 people together over two or three days in an attempt to plan a joint future. Participants are divided up into interest or "stakeholder" groups, with sessions in which the groups decide what they are particularly proud of or sorry for. One Future Search, which took place at Forres in Aberdeenshire and focused on youth issues, found a remarkable unanimity of views between some disparate groups In the "Prouds and Sorries" session, "sorries" included "lack of communication"

(the youth group), "not listening enough" (community organisations) and "although listening more, ignoring most of what is heard" (the "authority" group). And while the youth group diagnosed police as the main problem – police, they said, "abuse power towards the young and are prejudiced, eg young people are assumed to be drunk even if sober" – they added: "There is stereotyping both ways – youth stereotype the police too".

Another clear benefit of participation is that it improves the quality of decision-making. Research by the New Economics Foundation on community quality of life indicators has shown that the best measurements, and measurers, often come from within communities themselves. In one study in Merthyr Tydfil in 1996, it took a survey by local schoolchildren before a reliable picture of local crime could be established. Local police records were less accurate simply because people were more prepared to tell the children the truth.

As these and many other stories make clear, it's a powerful experience to be able to share your views, and fears, with others – others whom you may often have perceived as hostile – and then to hear that those "others" feel the same. Unfortunately it's an all too rare one in contemporary democracy. Part of the reason is an absence of structure – the right kind of format to make the democratic conversation possible. Part of it is the wrong kind of spirit – one that gives away power with one hand but takes it back with the other. The next chapter shows how getting it wrong is, sadly, rather more difficult than getting it right.

3 Tales from the Front Line

In 1998 the Royal Parks Agency raised the possibility of restricting cars in Richmond Park, London. In November 1999 it reported to the three surrounding local authorities, Kingston, Richmond and Wandsworth. Their request for further traffic counts delayed the agency's public consultation, which did not begin until summer 2000. What followed provided an small but impressive cameo of why democracy isn't working.

The proposals, not unnaturally, aroused strong feelings in local residents. Yet the main outlet for these, apart from a petition organised by the Richmond Park Conservatives, was the letters page of the *Richmond and Twickenham Times*. The following quotations, all from the paper, show how unsuitable a forum this was – and how, in the absence of an appropriate format or structure, there was little to help people to form their opinions, let alone identify where the common ground with others might lie.

The fundamental flaws included:

- **Disagreement on the facts.** What impact would restriction of traffic flows in the park have on surrounding roads? Statements that it would create "unbearable" congestion in local streets were juxtaposed with other statements that it would not –

that fears of such congestion were "wholly incorrect". In the absence of other evidence, which of these statements were to be believed?

- **The "rubbishing" of opponents' views,** often in highly coloured or emotive terms. Faced with denials that the traffic would shift *en masse* to local streets, one councillor insisted that it would, creating "a steel ring of gridlock and fumes".

- **Scaremongering and playing on fears.** A suggestion that cars in the park made women feel safer was linked to the murder of Rachel Nickell on Wimbledon Common.

- **Use of hostile debating ploys.** Some letters, for example, were openly sarcastic. "Deadly dog walkers and barbaric senior citizens should be ashamed of themselves by daring to enter the park, thereby bothering those many lovable caring cyclists on their Raleigh Turbo-propelled 2000 GTs", according to one correspondent.

- **Lack of agreement on what the debate is about.** For example, a statement that "there is no visual or scientific evidence of car pollution damaging the park environment" was followed by another statement that "the issue at stake… is not pollution in the surrounding area or the survival of flora and fauna but amenity value". Faced with a lack of clarity on what the "issue at stake" actually is, people argue "past" each other.

Not surprisingly, one letter-writer described the debate as "a ping-pong match". There was no way of building on views that might promote consensus – such as, for example, "I too am a motorist [but] I am increasingly aware that my car's presence represents something negative to the park". Nor was there any sense of where the balance of views lay. According to the vice-chairman of the Friends of Richmond Park a "moderate majority" of people visiting the Richmond Park stand at the May Fair "agreed with varying levels of park restrictions". But there was no way of establishing how representative a sample this was.

What of the politicians? The local authorities set up the Richmond Park Forum, supposedly to represent residents' views on the park; actually, it consists solely of councillors. The forum has not been seen as neutral. One letter to the *Richmond and Twickenham Times* said it should more accurately be entitled the "campaign to keep Richmond Park congested, noisy and polluted". Even the paper's editorial described it as "just another arm of the road lobby". The agency meanwhile issued a "consultation questionnaire". This contained mainly tick boxes with little or no room for comment. Its distribution appeared erratic. The authority's proposals appeared nine months later and are still, in 2002, being fiercely opposed.

A tale of two cities

If Richmond is, at least partly, a story of polarised and degraded debate, our next tale involves mismanaged

consultation. It concerns a city with a central controlled parking zone (CPZ). CPZs have the effect of displacing parking by commuters and shoppers to the predominantly residential areas around the centre – making access difficult for those who live there.

As part of UK government commitments to traffic and parking management, the local authority started to consider extending its CPZs into these residential areas. External consultants were asked to make recommendations. They proposed an extension to the CPZ, suggested suitable areas and outlined basic elements of the scheme – the number of permits per household or business, costs, visitors' permits and parking restrictions on residential streets. They also recommended – in a report that subsequently became public – minimal consultation on the ground that the issue was likely to be extremely contentious.

Early in 1999 a consultation leaflet was sent out, describing the proposal and seeking views by return. It went to all residents and businesses in the proposed new CPZ but not to those in the areas immediately beyond, who were likely to suffer the next wave of knock-on effects.

Public reaction was immediate and hostile. It was made worse by the fact that the authority was ostensibly seeking views in a "consultation" yet had already put in a provisional order for the parking meters. The hostility was both to the proposals themselves, and to the lack of any attempt to involve local people or to offer choices.

Emergency public meetings were held, protest groups formed, judicial review considered and the engineer's department flooded with letters and complaints.

The scheme was rejected except in one area suffering badly from commuter parking. The authority's leaflet had made clear that the choice for residents was all areas or none: however, it then changed its mind and suggested that the scheme might be implemented in just area. This caused a second flurry of opposition.

At this point much staff time – supposedly saved by using consultants – had been spent on merely explaining the situation; no clear way forward existed. The elected members considered shelving the idea. However, the council finally decided to try again in two or three areas where there was evidence of particularly serious problems and where the majority against the expanded CPZ had been narrow. There was further consultation, also by leaflet. No mention was made of the possible knock-on effects from this new scheme, nor was there any further consultation with those in the remaining areas where no scheme was now proposed.

After almost four years this initiative has proceeded no further and considerable frustration has built up.

Fortunately it doesn't have to be like this. A second city – let us call it City B – had a similar parking issue, prompting the local authority to think about extending its CPZ in the

summer of 1999. A public announcement that this was being considered caused a rush of comments and reactions, many of these as negative as those received, later in the process, in City A above. One group of objectors even appointed its own consultants and briefed counsel.

City B, however, decided to consult straight away. Round one of the consultation involved a series of public neighbourhood meetings. As well as general invitations, specific ones went to groups and organisations, such as schools, likely to suffer knock-on effects – whether they were local or in surrounding areas.

On average, almost 100 people attended each local meeting. There was initial caution about being invited to express their views without, as yet, a scheme to react to. Yet the decision to "listen" to citizens early enough for them to make a difference worked. The meetings were mainly interactive: individuals and groups contributed to long lists of parking-related issues and key principles for change. There was a short presentation from the council officers about the scope and limits of a CPZ and an opportunity for questions. One key question was, of course: "How do we know you mean it when you say you will listen to us?" People were also asked how they wanted to be consulted again, when proposals were ready.

From analysis of the results of these meetings, an outline of proposals began to emerge. The next stage of collaborative working was a "stakeholder meeting" with representatives

from some 70 local groups and organisations and including elected members. People worked both on possible solutions and on how to consult at the options stage. Choices were kept open as late as possible. Next came a carefully targeted consultation on the possible options for implementation – location, permit numbers and costs. This was done using leaflets and small local exhibitions.

The end result was a scheme with clear community support which applied to some but not all areas – as the consultation had indeed suggested. It was supported enthusiastically by elected members and was due to be implemented in the summer of 2000. The total time from the start of the process to its agreement by committee was less than 10 months.

4 Reinventing Democracy

Active democracy is not "pie in the sky". There are many examples of how it can be made to work. Even at the level of grassroots consultation, as the last chapter showed, some authorities succeed. What should we be looking for – what are the rules that govern whether democracy can be made to succeed?

There are four basic principles. We need to make it easy for people to discuss issues that concern them; to ensure that these discussions help people form their opinions, because they consist of dialogue not debate; to make sure these discussions have influence; and to legitimise decisions.

Helping people to take part

In encouraging participation, politicians tend to think in terms of structures – in terms, say, of "strengthening parish councils" – because they spend so much of their time inside them. But what Oscar Wilde said of socialism applies to politics in general – it takes up too many evenings. So we must concentrate in the first place not on structures but on issues. We must make it easy for people to take part on the issues they care about – and recognise that many of these are local and environmental. Twelve thousand people, for example, wrote to protest about an incinerator proposed for Guildford.

Two initiatives in the US have focused on this area. National Issues Forums provide briefing materials that are used by 3,200 citizens' fora every year. A study of the effects found some remarkable broadening effects. Fifty three per cent of the participants changed their minds, 71 per cent had second thoughts; and 78 per cent had encountered good viewpoints different from their own. The second US initiative, Choices, runs programmes on international issues for both general audiences and high school students – over 400,000 people take part each year. A typical programme consists of four discussions at public libraries led by a local scholar. Among the topics are global environmental problems, trade, China and conflict resolution. Participation is open to everyone.

In the UK Choices was tried out in 30 schools and colleges in Avon in 1995. The teachers involved reported high levels of student enjoyment and engagement and some "amazingly powerful" speeches. When Choices for Bristol generated ideas for improving the city by distributing 7,000 copies of a discussion guide, it received 2,032 suggestions – and published a booklet listing every one of them.

People also, as we have seen, need help forming their opinions. This happens through a process of deliberation, defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "careful consideration" or "the discussion of reasons for and against". One of the best descriptions of this process is by Daniel Yankelovich in his book *Coming to Public Judgement.*

Yankelovich divides deliberation into three phases: consciousness raising; working through; and resolution. He argues that both working through and resolution involve three elements: intellectual, where people clarify their thinking; emotional, where people understand the nature and source of their feelings; and moral, where people work their way through conflicting values. Working through, he says, takes time and happens best when people come together in debate.

Most discussion of the criteria for good deliberation is based on the work of the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas and his attempts to define an "ideal speech situation". Habermas's basic distinction is between fairness and competency. Fairness means that people are free to turn up, make statements, discuss the statements of others, and influence the outcome. Competency means that the people who are deliberating have the best discussion and come to the best decision of which they are capable. This has to do with access to information and with how information is used.

Sometimes fairness and competency collide. Experts may be more competent to assess the validity of certain information, but it would not be fair to give them precedence in attending or speaking. Sometimes they support each other. The rules of procedure that achieve competency may also promote fairness – for example, making sure everyone has a chance to speak.

One important criterion, which contributes to both fairness and competence, is that the process should be under the control of a variety of stakeholders, so that no group can dominate. A UK national consensus conference on radioactive waste management in 1999 was funded by Nirex and two government bodies. Greenpeace, which was not involved, argued that the title of the event skewed the debate towards the pro-nuclear establishment, because it excluded the question of whether nuclear waste should be created at all.

Citizens' juries are an increasingly popular method of bringing people together to form opinions. The number of local authorities in Britain using them rose from less than 20 in 1991 to 110 in 1997. By contrast with National Issues fora and Choices, they involve an invited group, chosen to be representative of the community. Typically, a citizens' jury consists of 16 people, who receive help from one or two independent moderators and spend around four days hearing presentations from witnesses before reporting their conclusions.

Some accounts of juries in action are very moving – vividly highlighting, for example, the difference between debate and dialogue. During one citizens' jury on health, a woman described the scene round her kitchen table the night before: "I looked around the table at my kids and husband. Everyone was talking and no-one was listening to anyone else; not like here when we all listen and take it in turns. I told them we should all be listening to each other, and my

husband laughed and said: 'Don't worry, kids – your mum has been doing a citizens' jury… She'll be back to normal soon'".

The starting point for citizens' juries is the legal system. By contrast, deliberative polling starts with the idea of opinion polls – to which it adds deliberation. In the 1994 deliberative poll already mentioned, 300 people spent a weekend in Manchester discussing crime. The proportion agreeing that the courts should send fewer people to prison rose from 29 per cent to 44 per cent during the weekend. Intriguingly – but not unexpectedly, given the number of people involved – the 300 included a number of convicted criminals. A report on the exercise concluded:

"The criminals enriched the dialogue. They had actually been to prison. They had some firsthand (if anecdotal) sense of what motivates people to commit crimes, and of what might deter them from doing so."

Making sure voices are heard

It's all very well to discuss and deliberate, of course. But such deliberations have to lead somewhere if they are to be seen to have point. Structures have to be created to enable the discussions to influence events and decisions. In some cases, issues will be raised by politicians – this is covered later. But it is vital that citizens should also be able to raise issues – that there should be scope for citizen initiative. As

John Harvey of the Direct Democracy Campaign notes:

"If a petition signed by one per cent of the [Swiss] electorate is submitted calling for a referendum on some issue currently under consideration by government, then a referendum has to be held. The signatures of two per cent of the voters are enough to call a vote on any other issue not yet under governmental consideration."

Deliberation also needs to be more adventurous and inclusive. Impressive as National Issues and Choices are, it is possible to take the process beyond the public library to the pub and the home. How this might be done is described in the next chapter. It is also important to connect people who do not normally meet. One example of this is Imagine, developed by the New Economics Foundation from an American approach called Appreciative Inquiry. By getting people to tell each other stories of what works in their community, Imagine has proved a powerful means of involving the excluded, building up a shared vision of a place and generating the social energy needed to turn this into action. In the UK, it has been pioneered in Waterloo in London and Thanet in Kent.

There are complex trade-offs between size, numbers and representativeness, however. As noted above, citizens' juries and deliberative polling involve fewer people than National Issues Forums and Choices but have the advantage of being representative – not in a conventional political sense but in the sense that they are representative of those directly involved with the issues. In the

deliberative poll on crime, the presence of people with criminal records helped ensure the polling group represented society at large. Even large events, such as Washington DC's second Citizens' Summit, which brought 3,500 people together in 2001, can still involve only a small proportion of the total population.

After deliberation, decisions need to be legitimised. A referendum is one way of doing this, although it may take several forms. In some of the smallest Swiss cantons, decisions are sometimes taken at town meetings, which all voters may attend; the same principle operates at the lowest level of local government, the *Gemeinder* (commune), of which there are some 3,000.

According to the Direct Democracy Campaign, several thousand voters may turn out for such town square meetings. "The proceedings can be heated and lively. Voters vote by show of hands on issues of local accounts and taxation, recommended new by-laws, planning and development issues, and anything else which is making the headlines in the local area. Turnout is sometimes low at these meetings, but there are usually rules in place whereby a minority in the crowd can demand a paper ballot if it is felt that a decision made by show of hands would not achieve a democratic result."

Above this scale, a referendum may be needed. Under the UK's Local Government Act of 1972, six voters can call a parish meeting and if at least 10 people turn up and call for

a referendum on a local issue, the parish council is obliged to hold one – although the results are only advisory.

Another possibility is a preferendum, which attempts to capture a subtler range of possibilities than the conventional referendum, pushing these through into consensus. Preferenda have been promoted by the Northern Ireland-based De Borda Institute, which promotes inclusive voting systems, and involve three stages – debating, voting and analysing the vote. During the debating stage, as people suggest amendments and modifications, a range of proposals emerges. When the meeting agrees that all points of view have been captured, participants use a points system to list each one in order of preference. In a 10-option ballot, for example, voters give 10 points to their most preferred option and one point to their least. If one option commands a "consensus" – 75 per cent support from all participants is the suggested minimum – it is adopted. Otherwise debate resumes on the most popular options until consensus is achieved.

If one theme emerges strongly from all the ideas outlined above, it is participation. Yet many people find it hard to square participatory ideals with the theory and practice of a representative democracy. And where do all these new ideas leave the politicians? The next chapter briefly examines how participation and representation can co-exist.

5 What About the Politicians?

It's hard to give power away. Most politicians promise to do it, but when they get into office they find compelling reasons to do the opposite. One of the most depressing narratives of contemporary Britain is the apparently resistless growth of centralisation. Partly, it's a personal thing. What's the point of spending your life climbing to the top if you can't then indulge in a little judicious autocracy?

A politics which involves the led as well as the "leaders" works much better, however. Politicians need people's commitment not only for taking decisions but for implementing policies – a point graphically illustrated by the ill-fated poll tax of the late 1980s. More recently local authorities have taken a step in this direction by asking voters for their views on council spending.

Most, unsurprisingly, reserved to themselves the final decision. One, however – Milton Keynes – undertook to abide by voters' preferences. People were allowed to specify which of three spending and council tax levels they wanted. Forty-five per cent of people cast their votes – compared with 26 per cent in the previous local elections.

According to John Stewart, the Birmingham University political scientist who is one of the most thoughtful contemporary writers on this subject, the passive concept of representation, of the sort we now have in the UK and throughout many other liberal democracies, leaves little or no place for participation. This has produced "a tendency to see representative and participatory democracy as opposed", he argues. But there is no inherent contradiction:

"Given an active process of representation… representative democracy requires and is strengthened by participatory democracy. It is the role of elected representatives to aid the process of deliberation and in the end, if required, to balance and judge differing views."

The municipality of Almere in the Netherlands, for example, has developed what it calls a "consensus meter". This is used on-line and is similar in some respects to the preferendum, allowing electors a say in council priorities. For example, 20 possible projects were up for discussion. Which were the most important – or the most popular? The consensus meter allowed people to prioritise their choices. If a consensus was reached, it became council policy. Where there was no consensus, policy was set conventionally by the councillors.

The extent to which people participate partly depends on how much influence they think they will have. But if genuine participation can be injected into representative politics, two roles for politicians, especially at local level,

emerge. One involves actually setting policy; the other, providing the framework in which citizens can take decisions. Given the advent of Cabinet government in many local authorities, and the concentration of powers this entails, such a change would be highly opportune. As in Parliament, a new role is needed for "backbenchers". If councillors can rise above the *machismo* that comes with the territory – the notion that their job is about taking "tough decisions" – they could start helping citizens discover what citizenship means.

There are benefits for all, leaders and led alike, in this approach. Milton Keynes gave away more decision-making power than other local authorities – but got deeper involvement and commitment in return. Similarly, people who have taken part in National Issues Forums in the US learn that there is no faceless "they" to blame. The polarised debate on emission standards from an arsenic plant in the US, mentioned in Chapter 1, led to attempts by the Environmental Protection Agency to heal the divisions. Reporting on this process, the academic Esther Scott concluded: "In becoming involved, the public begins to appreciate the difficulty simply attendant on making regulatory decisions… and the inadequacy of simply identifying 'heroes' and 'villains' in environmental protection".

6 Breaking the Mould

The need to modernise democracy is widely recognised. In Britain, this has taken three forms: structural changes like reform of the House of Lords or devolution in Wales and Scotland; renewed attention to citizenship, for example in the school curriculum; and "technical fixes" to improve voting rates. These include e-voting and making postal votes available on demand. Much less attention has been paid to helping people become fuller citizens through discussing and influencing issues that they care about.

Many of the reforms needed have been covered in the last five chapters and involve reasonably straightforward changes in policy. Greater use of referenda is one – in particular greater use of the binding, as opposed to the merely advisory, referendum. Complementing this would be a right of citizens' initiative as practised in Switzerland – giving citizens the right not only to initiate referenda but the right to challenge agencies to initiate some of the deliberative processes already outlined.

The New Economics Foundation, for example, has trialled a democratic "game" called Democs – standing for "deliberative meetings organised by citizens" and described later in this chapter. Citizens should be able to challenge agencies to hold Democs.

We also need to create a policy environment that favours participation. Why should citizens not be rewarded for being active democrats? One exciting possibility is through time-banks, which enable people to "bank" credits they receive for sharing their skills and offering services: one time credit is equal to one hour of help, whatever the activity. These credits are then exchanged for the skills and services needed from other participants. Gardening, befriending, DIY and learning new skills are popular activities within most time banks.(Only time actually changes hands).

There are now 35 time banks operating in the UK, with many more sprouting in housing associations, community centres, schools, libraries, regeneration initiatives, local authorities and health centres. They offer a whole new way of revitalising local participatory democracy, by recognising people's involvement. In Watford, for example, the council used time banking to "repay" older residents for their advice on its recycling services – their rewards included a free local authority leisure card.

Rewards could also be financial. A citizens' income, for example, would recognise our responsibilities as citizens. The French idea of an *income d'insertion*, or participation income, involves paying a basic income to all citizens actively participating in a "worthwhile" way in society. One way of implementing it would be extending the working families' tax credit to all citizens participating in caring activities, a community group or a self-help group working for the good of the community.

Rewards should go not merely to individuals but to forward-looking agencies and institutions. We want to encourage more local authorities to behave like Milton Keynes. A simple way of achieving this would be to tie a proportion of central government allocations to local government to improvements in the voting rate. Another is better indicators of the quality of democracy. As a society, we are bad at measuring genuine quality of life, relying almost exclusively on (inaccurate) financial measures such as GNP. The government recently answered such criticisms by introducing new "official" criteria to measure sustainable development. If we are serious about improving the health of democracy, we should take its pulse regularly – for example, monitoring , through regular opinion polls, the level of trust citizens have in government.

More broadly, the citizenship agenda has to be deepened and extended – into areas sighted but not yet fully charted. First, this requires a revaluation of the roles of "politicians" and "people". Giving newly "relegated" backbench councillors a role in boosting participation has already been mentioned. But politicians need to learn, in practice, how to trust the people. More public positions – on the boards of schools and hospitals, for example – should be chosen by lot. This was one of the cornerstones of Athenian democracy, expressing both the involvement of ordinary people and the "deprofessionalisation" of politics. Citizenship also needs to be developed far more in schools. Opinion-forming deliberative games such as Democs could

be particularly useful in enabling children to decide on issues that matter to them – the dinner rota or after-school activities, for example.

One should include the media in this search for a more grown-up democracy, since in many people's eyes they are one of the chief culprits for the dumbing-down of contemporary politics. Ed Fouhy, director of the Pew Center for Civic Journalism in the US, is by no means alone in his opinion that the media generally "exhibit the attention span of a hummingbird."

Civic journalism, now developing in the US, is one promising avenue out of the sound-bite culture. A typical example is *The Ledgerer-Enquirer*, the local newspaper of Columbus, a small town in the state of Georgia. In 1988 it published an eight-part series on the town's problems and opportunities on the theme "Columbus: Beyond 2000". The response was a vast collective yawn. In the words of the political scientist James Fishkin, "the community had a government but it lacked politics, in the sense of a politics based on citizen engagement and serious dialogue between citizens and leaders".

The paper's own response was to organise a town meeting. This helped launch a new organisation, United Beyond 2000. The next stage was the establishment of a volunteer task force. Finally a new strategic plan for Columbus was generated.

Another local newspaper in the US, the *Charlotte Observer*, organised fora that brought readers face to face with candidates for the governorship and the presidency. In an attempt to shape its own coverage to reflect voters' interests, the paper held an opinion poll and also convened a panel of 500 people to form a "citizens' agenda". This guided coverage of six issues during the 1992 campaign. One journalist commented: "We weren't just a newspaper any more, we were the electorate." When it ran stories on inner city crime, it pledged to stick with the story for at least a year and to work with neighbourhoods to find solutions.

A key issue for democracy is the environmental agenda, which demands that we recognise both nature and future generations – those who will inhabit the world that we leave – as stakeholders. Currently unrepresented, they need people to speak for them in the present. Mechanisms for achieving this are beginning to emerge. They include the Council of All Beings, developed by John Seed and Joanna Macy, and the UK Council for Posterity, launched in 1990, which aims to provide legal representation for the interests of future generations. Interestingly, such developments coincide with the growth of the internet, which is giving many people the experience of experimenting with identities not their own. Another recent proposal, from the Chilean lawyer Godofredo Stutzin, writing in *Resurgence* magazine, is that Nature be recognised as a legal entity.

Finally, new forms are needed, through which people can experience the maturer processes of democracy long since ceded to their representatives. The preferendum, already mentioned, involves both deliberation and the search for consensus. Some of these forms are bound to be experimental. Cafe Society, for example, launched with Channel 4, encouraged people to reserve a table in a bar or restaurant every so often, announce a topic, and debate it with all-comers. As already noted, a genuinely active democracy involves discussions that have influence – that feed into decisions. But new structures should encourage deliberation. In that sense, the recent Home Office proposal to support Speakers' Corners is a retrograde step, since these tend to be merely another form of shouting match.

Making "national debates" a reality

Democs, already mentioned, is the most recent experiment with a new form of democracy. Developed by the New Economics Foundation, it is a card game that allows anyone to play – and at the same time work through an issue of public policy. Democs have been developed on four issues in genetic research – stem cells, genetic diagnosis, insurance testing and xenotransplantation. Feedback suggests that not only do opinions shift considerably during the game – as registered in votes at the beginning and at the end – but that participants discover unexpectedly large areas of consensus.

Democs have a number of advantages over many of the experiments already described. The basic game involves up to six or eight people sitting round a table – although there can be as many tables as there is space. They can be organised by anyone – individuals, NGOs, agencies – and held virtually anywhere. Friends might hold one in somebody's home; they could make a change to quiz night in the local pub; or they could be part of a public meeting or a Women's Institute event. They are thus extremely cheap – by contrast, say, with a citizens' jury, which can cost £20,000. There are clear rules for conversation – designed, for example, to encourage listening, prevent interruptions and stop people feeling awkward about displaying "ignorance".

Perhaps as important as anything, they are a kind of game – the facts that form the basis of the discussion are first certified as balanced by a neutral body and then "nuggeted" on to cards, which are dealt out to the players. According to various theorists on the role of play in civilisation, including the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, author of *Homo Ludens*, games make people feel safe. They stimulate creativity through the provision of "absolute freedom within very definite limits."

This is not the place for a detailed discussion of how Democs work – references to this are listed at the end of the pocketbook. Nor is it being argued that Democs is the only way forward – as these pages have shown, many alternatives to the current orthodoxy have sprung up in the

last decade or so. But if politicians are serious when they use the terms "national debate" or "public debate" – whether the subject is education or the NHS or the complex scientific and ethical questions raised by the new science of human genetics – then Democs, or something similar, must play a part, if we want that debate to be genuinely public. Otherwise, it will merely involve the usual suspects – assorted politicians and pundits with the odd professional or expert thrown in for good measure – and the rest of us will remain passive, and resentful, consumers.

It is for these reasons that citizens, as already suggested, should have the right to challenge an agency to convene a Democs, if the body concerned doesn't call one itself. In either event, the organisation must commit itself on the use it will make of the results. In return, it can negotiate on the quality thresholds it expects – who comes, how the meetings are run and so on. The King's Fund, for example, has supported citizens' juries held by health authorities where the authority wished to resolve a choice between clearly defined options, each of which – in theory at least – the authority was equally willing to adopt. There must also be agreement on content material.

The issues facing mass democracy at the start of the 21st century are urgent. If democracy is indeed a conversation, as Dewey remarked, much of the conversation we see in contemporary politics, notably in the House of Commons, is loud, rude, superficial and confrontational. It is not a dialogue where people seek the truth but a competition

where they score points for shouting. Turnout in the 2001 general election was at an all-time low of 59 per cent; among younger voters, it was 39 per cent. According to the Electoral Commission's report, the "single most important issue" arising from the 2001 election was "the need to address, urgently and radically, the decline in public participation."

In a truly participatory democracy, people would no longer, to repeat Mill's words, "have their faculties only half developed". Society would be more cohesive, less resentful. For this to happen, we need to reinterpret "representation". MPs and councillors must rethink their jobs – so that these are less about "taking decisions", more about enabling citizens to have their say. Burke, one of the theorists of representative democracy, also reminds us of how genuinely trusting societies are created. "To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle, the germ, as it were, of public affections, " he wrote. "It is the first link in the series by which we proceed toward a love to our country and to mankind."

Burke's words are more relevant now than ever. The ideas outlined in this pocketbook, from Democs to preferenda, undoubtedly involve more than dropping a voting slip in a ballot box every few years. Those with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo – a category which will no doubt include many of today's politicians – may even argue they are unrealistic. But what are the alternatives? A sullen

and cynical electorate dragooned into the polling station by compulsory voting? Uninvolved and uninformed voters pressing keys on their computers? Anyone who thinks consultation is expensive, as the saying goes, should try conflict. This pocketbook has sought to show that ideas for empowering people and raising participation are there to be grasped. In other words, we can have an active democracy – if we really want it.

7 Summary – A Checklist for Active Democracy

At the opening of a new century, mass democracy is in a parlous state. Issues seem ever more complex, debate is increasingly polarised, voters – especially young people – have become alienated. In the name of "representation", power has been centralised and leaders turned into autocrats. Turnout in the 2001 UK general election was at an all-time low of 59 per cent. According to the Electoral Commission, the single most important issue arising from the 2001 election was the need to address, "urgently and radically", the decline in public participation

Active democracy improves decision-making, generates policies that have public support and makes for a cohesive society. A Swiss study found that involvement by people in government decision-making made them significantly happier. Local authorities that make genuine attempts to consult voters get faster decisions and more commitment by voters in return. Examples include Milton Keynes council, which implemented the results of a referendum it held on council tax levels.

A range of initiatives have been taken over the last 10–15 years to involve citizens in deliberation, opinion-forming and consensual decision making. They include consensus

voting, National Issues Forums, Choices, citizens' juries, deliberative polling and the preferendum. These are mainly described in Chapters 4 and 6. More recently, the New Economics Foundation has developed Democs (deliberative meetings organised by citizens), a cheap, self-organised card game aimed at establishing common ground among citizens on controversial issues, and feeding this through into political decisions (see Chapter 6).

It is vital for the future of democracy that such initiatives, and other more established forms like the referendum, are pursued and extended. This would help to give real meaning to that much-used but little-understood term "national debate". Changes could include:

- A right of citizens' initiative, enabling voters to challenge agencies and governments to hold referenda, Democs and other forms of citizen deliberation and decision-making.

- Agreements under which agencies agree to abide by the results of such citizen deliberations. Referenda should be made binding rather than advisory.

- Refining forms of referendum such as the preferendum (explained in Chapter 4) that enhance genuine deliberation and the search for consensus.

We also need more radical innovations to meet the new challenges of democracy. These include:

- Rewarding citizens for their participation in democracy. Ways of doing this range from time-banking, in which people exchange debits and credits in the form of volunteer hours worked, to the straightforward financial payment by the State of a "participation income," administered through the working families' tax credit. (see Chapter 6).

- A "participation grant" to progressive local authorities – achieved through an annual set-aside in central government's allocation to councils that is conditional upon improvements in local voting rates.

- New Government-backed indicators of democratic health and participation levels to complement those recently adopted for sustainable development. One possibility is a regular opinion survey measuring levels of trust between citizens and government.

- Giving rights and voices to nature and to future generations, for example through innovations such as the Council of All Beings and the Council for Posterity.

- Filling positions on public bodies from members of the public, chosen by lot.

These proposals are discussed in more depth in Chapter 6. More generally, we need to extend the processes of participation into new areas and rethink its relationship to representation.

Changes in this area include:

- Recasting the role of "backbench" councillors, often effectively powerless because of the growth of cabinet Government. Their job should increasingly be to facilitate and enable citizen involvement.

- Developing citizenship in schools through "games" such as Democs built around practical decision-making projects for children.

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InterAct is an alliance of practitioners, researchers, writers and policy makers committed to putting effective deliberative, participatory and co-operative approaches at the heart of debate and decision-making in the UK. More details at www.interactweb.org.uk

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Sources and References

More details on Democs are available on the NEF website at www.neweconomics.org.

Perry Walker can be contacted at perry.walker@neweconomics.org.

NEF's briefing on Democs, *A Better Democracy is on the Cards*, can be downloaded from the website.

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The Mutual State: How Local Communities Can Run Public Services, by Ed Mayo and Henrietta Moore (2001) NEF Pocketbook 5, ISBN 1 899407 405

Ed Mayo is executive director of the New Economics Foundation and Henrietta Moore is professor of social anthropology at the London School of Economics. The authors set out a radical agenda for public service reform, looking at the scope for citizens' involvement in mutual/non-profit social enterprises.

A New Way to Govern: Organisations and society after Enron, by Shann Turnbull (2002). NEF Pocketbook 6, ISBN 1 899407 480

The business world, and the Stock Markets, have been rocked by the scandals surrounding the collapse of Enron and WorldCom. Shann Turnbull, a leading business practitioner as well as an academic, makes the case for a new "ecological" approach to the running of organisations, based on self-regulation, decentralisation and stakeholder involvement.

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Democracy, by general consent, is in a parlous state. Fewer people are voting or joining political parties, cynicism and alienation are widespread, debate is polarised, governments are perceived as in thrall to powerful interests. According to the UK's Electoral Commission, the single most important issue arising from the 2001 election was the need to address "urgently and radically" the decline in public participation.

As Perry Walker shows in this latest NEF pocketbook, it doesn't have to be this way. The last decade has seen a host of new initiatives aimed at giving people a voice as well as a vote – and thus of rejuvenating democracy where it matters, at the grassroots. The "constitutional reform" programme has largely ignored them – possibly because they involve a radical handover of power back to the people. But a genuinely participatory democracy not only offers the prospect of more efficient government and more meaningful "national debates". As the evidence demonstrates, it makes people happier too.

Perry Walker is development director of the democracy programme at the New Economics Foundation and a member of InterAct, the participation network. He has also worked for the civil service and the John Lewis Partnership.

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