

Revitalising politics through democratic innovation?

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The position paper that sets the scene for this conference begins with a wholehearted endorsement of Vernon Bogdanor's argument that the Draft Constitutional Renewal Bill will simply 'redistribute power between elites, not between elites and the people' and therefore 'will not have much effect on popular grievances' (Hay et al. 2008: 1). Within a month of these comments, the government published two discussion documents explicitly aimed at revitalising the relationship between elites and the people (although I'm not sure Vernon can take any credit!). The Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) published *Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power*, quickly followed by the Ministry of Justice's (MoJ) *A National Framework for Greater Citizen Engagement*. The first document focuses on strategies for local empowerment, with particular emphasis on different methods that local authorities can use to engage their communities. The second analyses the relationship between citizens and national decision making, proposing new institutional arrangements.

Are these proposals the precursor to a meaningful shift in the political division of power: the institutionalisation of democratic innovations that will increase and deepen citizen participation in political decision making? For many commentators (academic and otherwise), such a strategy is perceived as a promising approach (amongst others) for re-engaging a disillusioned and disenchanted public (Fung 2003; Fung and Wright 2003; Power Inquiry 2006; Smith 2005; 2009; Stoker 2006). Having extensively documented the disengagement of citizens from the institutions and practices of formal politics in advanced industrial democracies, Russell Dalton suggests:

The public's democratic expectations place a priority on reforms that move beyond the traditional forms of representative democracy. Stronger parties, fairer elections, more representative electoral systems will improve the democratic process, but these reforms do not address expectations that the democratic process will expand to provide new opportunities for citizen input and control. (Dalton 2004: 204).

In a number of passages, the government's rhetoric chimes with such an analysis. For example, CLG boldly states:

Communities in control: real people, real power has a simple aim: to pass power into the hands of local communities so as to generate vibrant local democracy in every part of the country and give real control over local decisions and services to a wider pool of active citizens ... The key themes are power, influence and control ... It is about democracy, and how democratic practices and ideals can be applied to our complex, modern society ... our reforms are designed to **shift power, influence and responsibility** away from existing centres of power and into the hands of communities and citizens. These are the people who ultimately must hold power in a mature democracy. Our reforms are neither about tweaking the system nor about redistributing political power from one group of politicians to another. (CLG 2008: 12; emphasis in original)

And in terms of institutional design, the documents argue for innovations that would warm the heart of many a theorist of participation, including participatory budgeting and mini-publics such as citizens' juries. The rhetoric is certainly one of a redistribution of power between elites and citizens.

But – and there always seems to be a ‘but’ – there are deep problems with the government’s proposals that will limit their effectiveness and may in fact increase dissatisfaction and disillusionment as new modes of engagement fail to fulfil their promise. Why is this the case?

First, a comparison of the CLG and MoJ documents immediately exposes a strong distinction between the willingness of government to recast the political division of labour at the local level and at national level. As we saw from the quote above, reforms at the local level ‘are designed to shift power, influence and responsibility away from existing centres of power and into the hands of communities and citizens’ (CLG 2008: 12). The institutions and practices of local representative democracy are clearly open for restructuring. In contrast, at the national level, such a redistribution of power is blatantly not on the table. While ‘the Government believes that, where appropriate, national policy needs to be more accessible to people through greater use of engagement mechanisms that provide opportunities for people to participate across the UK... representative democracy remains the cornerstone of our constitution and Parliament must remain at the apex of the political process. The democratically elected members of Parliament must retain the final say over decisions’ (MoJ 2008: 5 & 15).

This distinction between different sites of authority will cause problems for at least two reasons. First, the unwillingness of Parliament to cede its own power and influence in the way that it expects local authorities to act is likely to lead to local political and bureaucratic resistance to the empowerment agenda. While successive governments have weakened the powers of local authorities through centralising policies, they are now asking them to cede many of the powers they have remaining downwards to local citizens and communities. It is an understatement that this is unlikely to be popular amongst local elites! Second, citizens will not make the neat distinctions between national and local politics as drawn by government

departments. If the argument is right that we should increase opportunities for citizens to participate in political decisions that affect their lives, then only shifting the political division of labour at the local level is a recipe for further disillusionment as more significant political decisions are kept at arms length.

The second major problem with the government's proposals is their lack of imagination in relation to institutional design. The democratic devices that are being proposed are poor imitations of those at the leading edge of democratic experimentation. The government is way behind the curve. Two examples will suffice. CLG, and in particular the Secretary of State Hazel Blears, has made much of the pilots in participatory budgeting (PB) that are taking place across the UK. This is re-affirmed in *Communities in Control* which name-checks the doyen of PB, Porto Alegre (CLG 2008: 67). While mention of Porto Alegre helps to legitimate government action, it also reinforces the paucity of imagination. PB in Porto Alegre is celebrated for a number of reasons: it distributes a significant proportion of the city's budget – 'between 9 percent and 21 percent of a total budget that amounted to \$160 million in 2000' (Baiocchi 2005: 14); it generates significant levels of participation – 16,600 citizens participated in the popular assemblies in 2001 (Harvard University Center for Urban Development Studies 2003: 40); it has generated a more open and transparent form of governance; and the incentives embedded in the design have attracted significant numbers of poor citizens and led to a redistribution of resources towards poorer neighbourhoods that had often been neglected by pre-PB administrations (Smith 2009). Compare this to what is happening in the UK, which can best be described as a sophisticated form of consultation that 'engenders greater understanding of the complexities of local councils' decision-making, including compromises and trade-offs' (CLG 2008: 67). Even if local politicians are willing to cede power on budgetary matters (which is highly debatable), there is little leeway to affect the distribution of resources since

local authorities have negligible fiscal independence from central government. Only a relatively small proportion of the local authority budget is open for discretionary allocation.

A second example of the lack of political will and imagination can be drawn from *A National Framework for Greater Citizen Engagement*. We have already noted that the discourse within this document is one of reluctance on the part of national government to cede meaningful influence and power. This is reinforced by its suggestions for institutional reform: no extension of the use of referendums and recommendations for increased use of citizens' summits, citizens' juries and petitions. Let us take the example of citizens' juries. The government recognises the potential of deliberative forums to enable 'a sample of the public to be given the opportunity to deliberate on the questions before them and then reach and express a considered view about the issue' (MoJ 2008: 15). But the proposal for citizens' juries belies government's lack of faith in public participation. While it promote a rather timid idea of bringing 50-100 randomly-selected citizens together for 1-2 days to offer recommendations on complex issues, other polities have experimented with significant mini-publics. For example, in both British Columbia and Ontario, the legislatures empowered randomly-selected citizens' assemblies to sit for a number of months (including learning, consultation and deliberation phases) to make recommendations on electoral reform. These recommendations were then put direct to a referendum, linking the deliberative forum to a public ratification process (Warren and Pearse 2008; Smith 2009). This is a long way from the rather paltry citizens' juries suggested by the Ministry of Justice and represents a far different desire to challenge the existing political division of labour.

What can we draw from this brief analysis of the government's commitment (or lack of it) to embedding democratic innovations? First, what is being offered is a poor imitation of the rich democratic innovation and

experimentation going on in other parts of the world and as such represents a rather conservative reform strategy which is unlikely to empower citizens and communities – in fact it may have the reverse effect in raising and then dashing expectations. Second, it indicates a distrust of citizens and their capacity to make considered political judgements. In their position paper, Colin Hay, Gerry Stoker and Andy Williamson make much of the extent to which government has been enthusiastic in off-loading / sub-contracting political responsibility for collective decision making to non-elected agencies and institutions and the negative effect this has on the link between citizens and decision makers and public accountability more generally. Such agencies and institutions are apparently seen by politicians as more trustworthy (Hay et al 2008: 9). It is clear from the institutional restructuring offered in *Communities in Control* and *A National Framework for Greater Citizen Engagement* that politicians do not have the same level of trust in citizens.

Recent government proposals indicate the worrying extent to which there is a lack of the political will and imagination necessary to begin to reconstruct the political division of labour; to redistribute power between elites and the people in any meaningful sense. This is a great shame because a strategy of embedding democratic innovations promises one way to revitalise politics – drawing citizens into the political decision making process in a way that responds to significant elements of the democratic malaise as laid out by Hay, Stoker and Williamson. As such the government's proposals for citizen engagement will have little or no effect on popular grievances.

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