

Towards Real Democracy - Introduction

Fred Emery, 1989

It seems as if each major election in a Western democracy brings forth another spate of serious public discussions of the weaknesses of the democratic forms of government. If it is not the quality of the candidates that is being deplored it is the quality of the electoral campaigns or the cynicism of the electorate. Between elections the media appear to be constantly preoccupied with the recurrent scandals of political corruption and deception. [If only Fred could hear it now! And see the significant trends towards minor parties whilst the serious discussion of a shift to the jury system (DP2) still takes place in the background. But it does appear to be emerging into the visibly public space more frequently, ME.]

Some of this can be dismissed as 'media hype'. A great deal of this cannot be so dismissed.

What is absent is any sense of our learning from the seemingly endlessly repetitious analysis of the faults in the system. It is not quite fair to say that. There has been, over the past couple of decades, a number of promising ideas; e.g., for Ombudspeople, Freedom of Information and more effective electoral registration and redistribution. However, even when these ideas have been adopted, the expected improvements in our self governance have failed to appear or, if they did appear, were quickly and seriously attenuated. The only real learning appears to be that nothing can be done.

I have suggested that this debate is bogged down because we cannot think in terms of anything but representative democratic systems. Furthermore, I have suggested that those systems have a powerful and compelling logic of their own. Locked into that logic we finish up with Churchill in deploring 'democracy' but deploring the known alternatives even more. It has been my contention that, behind the backs of political scientists and others concerned with political democracy, practical democratic alternatives to the representative systems have already emerged. These are alternatives that enable us to move closer to the ideal of democracy; i.e., toward participative democracy in the conditions of the modern industrial society.

I have not been discussing participative democracy just as a theoretical possibility - there was quite enough of such empty speculation in the late sixties. I have been discussing implications of enduring practical experiments in the harshly practical world of work. In the world of work those ideas of participation have gone from being interesting possibilities to serious probabilities that have to be considered in the design of any work organization. All that I have done in the world of politics is to claim that this experience has transformed the idea of participation from a mere theoretical possibility into a real, practical possibility. Not much of an advance - but then people will only take seriously those things that are real possibilities in the world in which they are living. If we fail to recognize that real democratic alternatives to representative systems are possible, then we remain condemned to continue on the flight path of the fabled ooloo bird who flew in ever decreasing circles.

Life, Liberty and Property could well have served as a title for this document (Towards Real Democracy). That title was, however, pre-empted by Alfred Winslow Jones in 1941 to cover in his own way the same social dilemmas of modern democracies. These dilemmas are the provision of social support to the needy without creating dependency, maintaining

civil peace and good order without creating servility in the face of 'the majesty of the law', allowing for the property rights that are a condition for people entering the market as free people whilst guarding against those extremes of power that make a joke of the economic freedom of the majority.

These dilemmas have confronted all democratic societies. There is nothing surprising in this. Whilst some market oriented societies have not been democracies, all known democratic societies have been market oriented. One can expect that when people experience the freedom that comes with participation in markets (as propertied persons, not slaves) there will emerge social pressures to exercise similar choice of preferences in their governance. If it is accepted that they are competent to do the one, they will not readily accept arguments that they are incompetent to do the other. However, reliance on the market instead of administered exchange fairly, inevitably means that many will be 'needy', that many will emerge with great wealth and that those with great wealth will unduly influence the law makers and the enforcement of the laws.

The dilemmas have been greatly intensified by the emergence on the one side, of the massive bureaucracies of corporations and public administration, and on the other of a highly educated electorate freed, for the most part, from the mind dulling drudgery of labouring and menial service. It is the new level of these dilemmas that has been addressed by people like Dahl and Lindblom. But in 1977, Lindblom could still conclude that "boldly conceived major new democratic alternatives have not yet been designed. They may never be..." (p.344).

After analysing the interlocking roles of modern markets and modern politics, Lindblom observed that we have still failed to appreciate adequately the probability that "more than class, the major specific institutional barrier to fuller democracy may, therefore, be the autonomy of the private corporation" (p.356). It is this failure that appears to lead to his conclusion that without boldly conceived major new democratic alternatives "it may follow, then, that it is impossible for democracy to develop significantly beyond what is found in crippled form in existing polyarchy" (p.353). Without apparently knowing what had been emerging in the world of work since 1951, Lindblom felt that "the most fertile field for a more participatory democracy appears to be in industry...an arena in which authoritarianism has been for so long universally practised and little questioned" (p.334).

I have argued for a "bold major new democratic alternative". I have argued for this on the basis of lessons learnt from the emergence of participatory democracy in industry. Whatever the shortcomings, I hope that I have established that Lindblom's expectations about the most fruitful starting point for finding a bold new alternative have been justified (Extracted from *Towards Real Democracy*, 1989, Ontario QWL Centre, Ministry of Labour, Toronto, pp.119-120 and pp.211-213).

Reference

Lindblom C E 1977, *Politics and Markets*, Basic Books, NY.