

7. Direct democracy in the United Kingdom

A brief history of British democracy

The full title of this geographically small, but historically extremely powerful, country is “The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland”. ‘Great Britain’ is composed of England, Scotland and Wales. Wikipedia has a useful summary definition: “The United Kingdom is a political union made up of four constituent countries: England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The United Kingdom also has several overseas territories, including Gibraltar and the Falkland Islands. The Crown has a relationship with the dependencies of the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands; they are part of the British Isles but not part of the United Kingdom and are a possession of the Crown. A constitutional monarchy, the United Kingdom has close relationships with fifteen other Commonwealth Realms that share the same monarch – Queen Elizabeth II – as head of state.”

That political union was only finally agreed in 1921. Today, the ‘united’ Kingdom is under severe strain, with considerable centrifugal forces in evidence. Where devolution of power in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland helped to strengthen the sense of identity in these regions/nations, the majority English portion of the UK has been undergoing an identity crisis, asking itself: ‘What does it mean to be English?’ and re-discovering older symbols such as the flag of St. George.

England

The nation at the core of the union is England. First unified under Roman occupation in 55 BC, England was later carved up into seven separate kingdoms before being reunited in 1016, only to fall to the invading Norman army in 1066. Ever since 1016, England has been a single country under a single Crown. By international standards, this makes it a remarkably old nation. Between 1016 and 1707, England was a sovereign nation-state. However, it ceased to be a nation-state in 1707 when it joined with Scotland in a new, merged state. Ever since then, England has been one constituent nation in the United Kingdom.

Wales

Wales was never a unified state. The country consisted of fragmented chiefdoms until the English Crown annexed half of it in 1277, with the remainder following in 1536. Today Wales is one of four nations that make up the United Kingdom. Never having been an independent kingdom, but being an annex of England, it was subject to English law; it was run from Westminster; the Church of England was imposed as its official Church: and the English language was imposed as the official language. Wales did not ‘join’ England; it was unified by England and became England’s first conquest.

Scotland

Unlike Wales, Scotland was once an autonomous and unified state under a single Scottish Crown. For several centuries, the English and Scottish kingdoms skirmished. Gradually, however, Scotland fell under the growing economic and political influence of its more powerful south-

ern neighbour. In 1603, the two Crowns were unified. In 1707, the two states joined together in an Act of Union which established the United Kingdom of Great Britain. Scotland was clearly the weaker partner but the Act of Union preserved key aspects of Scottish autonomy. Scotland retained its own Church, its own legal system and its own education system. Joining with England, however, meant that Scotland lost its parliament, although it secured a new one in 1999.

Northern Ireland

Ireland, like Wales, was never a single state. It was divided into various Catholic clan chiefdoms until England defeated two of the big Ulster clan chiefs and seized their lands in 1607. This land was then reallocated to settlers from Britain, most of whom were Scottish Protestants. Protestant ascendancy was consolidated in 1690 when William of Orange followed James II to Catholic Ireland and defeated his forces at the Battle of the Boyne. William set up a Dublin parliament. But following yet another Irish rebellion an Act of Union was passed by the Westminster parliament in 1800. Ireland was absorbed into the United Kingdom and was governed directly from London. The four nations of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland were now fused together into a single state – the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

Opposition to British rule never went away and the Catholic population never accepted their subordination. Various bills for Irish Home Rule (what today we would call ‘devolution’) were introduced in the Westminster parliament, but all were lost. Irish nationalists led an uprising in Dublin in Easter 1916. After the First World War, Catholic rebels based in the south continued to fight for independence while Protestants in the north armed themselves in readiness to resist their absorption into a new, Catholic, Irish state. Faced with an impossible dilemma, Britain set up separate parliaments for Dublin and Belfast in 1920.

In 1921 the twenty-six southern counties were allowed to leave the United Kingdom and form the Irish Free State. The remaining six counties in the north, most of them heavily Protestant, remained part of the UK, which now became the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Unlike the Welsh, the Scots and the English, the people of Northern Ireland retained their own parliament. The Protestant majority had permanent control of this parliament at Stormont and they used it to further their interests. In the late 1960s, Catholics launched a series of civil rights protests. Gradually, as the protests escalated, the Catholic and Protestant communities began to fight, and troops from Britain were sent in to restore order.

In 1972, Britain closed the Stormont parliament and imposed direct rule from Westminster. After years of ‘troubles’ and endless talks, a peace deal was struck in 1998 between the British and Irish governments and various Northern Ireland parties. It is, however, a very fragile peace. (Acknowledgement: this section is based in large part on Dearlove and Saunders (2000), “Introduction to British Politics”).

The parliamentary system

The name 'Westminster' is often used as shorthand for the primary parliament of the UK, consisting of the two 'houses of parliament' (since 1999 there has also been a separate Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, and parliamentary Assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland). Some claim for Westminster the title of 'mother of parliaments', but although it is certainly old – its origins lie in the 13th century – the Westminster parliament is not the oldest parliament in the British Isles. The small but historically significant Isle of Man (between the UK and Ireland) has a claim to have the oldest continuous parliament in Europe – the Tynwald, descended from the Norse Thingvollr (= assembly field) founded there in the late 9th century (the Icelandic 'Althing' was established in 930 AD).

But there was also a much older tradition of (possibly open-air) councils in Britain, going back to the Anglo-Saxon period (5th-11th centuries). There is a record from the 7th century of annual meetings of the king's councillors at the so-called 'witenagemot' (literally 'wise man/councillor meeting'), and there were forms of decision-making by popular assembly at the local level.

William of Normandy's victory over the English in 1066 brought a feudal system, in which the king sought the advice of a council of tenants-in-chief and ecclesiastics before making laws. In 1215 the tenants-in-chief secured the Magna Carta from King John, which established that the king could not levy or collect any taxes (except the feudal taxes to which they were hitherto accustomed), save with the consent of his royal council, which slowly developed into a parliament. In 1265, Simon de Montfort, 6th Earl of Leicester summoned the first elected Parliament. The franchise in parliamentary elections for county constituencies was uniform throughout the country, extending to all those who owned the freehold of land to an annual rent of 40 shillings. In the boroughs, the franchise varied across the country; individual boroughs had varying arrangements. This set the scene for the so-called "Model Parliament" of 1295 adopted by Edward I. By the reign of Edward III (1327-1377), Parliament had been separated into two Houses: one including the nobility and higher clergy, the other including the knights and burgesses, and no law could be made, nor any tax levied, without the consent of both Houses, as well as that of the Sovereign.

The Laws in Wales Acts 1535-1542 treated Wales as part of England and brought Welsh representatives to Parliament. When Elizabeth I was succeeded in 1603 by the Scottish King James VI, who became also James I of England, the countries both came under his rule but each retained its own Parliament. James I's successor, Charles I, quarreled with Parliament, dissolving it no less than three times. The tension between king and parliament finally led to the English Civil War (in fact three wars). Estimates suggest that around 10 percent of the three kingdoms' population may have died during the civil wars. Ultimately, the parliamentary forces under Cromwell triumphed and, to the horror of large parts of Europe, Charles was publicly beheaded in 1649. Thus it was Britain which experienced the first anti-monarchical revolution, 140 years before the more famous revolution of 1789 in France. After Cromwell's death the Restoration of 1660 restored the monarchy and the House of Lords.

Amidst fears of a Roman Catholic succession, the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688 deposed James II (James VII of Scotland) in favour of the joint rule of Mary II and Wil-

liam III, whose agreement to the English Bill of Rights introduced a constitutional monarchy, though the supremacy of the Crown remained. For the third time, a Convention Parliament, i.e. one not summoned by the king, was required to determine the succession.

The House of Commons evolved at some point during the 14th century and has been in continuous existence since. The House of Commons (the "lower house") was once far less powerful than the House of Lords (the "upper house"), but is now by far the dominant branch of Parliament. The House of Commons' legislative powers exceed those of the House of Lords; under the Parliament Act 1911, the Lords' power to reject most bills was reduced to a mere delaying power. The Government of the United Kingdom is nominally answerable to the House of Commons; the Prime Minister stays in office only as long as he or she retains the support of the lower house.

No written constitution – no popular sovereignty – few direct-democratic rights

In Britain, as in most nominally representative democracies – especially those which have been, or still are, monarchies – representative and participatory rights have always had to be prised out of the hands of kings or other rulers. Even when, as in Britain, the real power of the monarchy has almost completely gone, the old hierarchical attitudes often remain, leaving their imprint on supposedly democratic 'representative' systems. So the British Government is 'Her Majesty's Government' and there is still a 'House of Lords' (finally undergoing radical reform, but still containing a proportion of hereditary peers). There is still a 'Royal Prerogative' which gives the monarch certain powers – but only at the request of the Prime Minister, in effect giving the latter the ability to bypass parliament (Tony Blair threatened to use the Royal Prerogative in 2003 to declare war on Iraq if parliament opposed his plans to support Bush).

"The liberal state was democratized [by the 1867 and 1884 Representation of the People Acts] but those in authority and power who recognized the inevitability of democracy were nevertheless eager to manage democratic politics, to limit it, and to entrench a conservative democracy. There was a concern to rule out direct participation; 'popular government'; the struggle for equality; and 'collectivism' and socialism, in favour of a pattern of limited, liberal, democracy that would work with and within the prevailing economic system". (Dearlove and Saunders, 2000, p.51)

Britain is unique in Europe in not having a written constitution. What passes for a constitution is a collection of laws, conventions and 'understandings'. One constitutional writer defined it as "what the people who work it think it is", and the current monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, is quoted as saying that "the British Constitution has always been puzzling and always will be" – scarcely a satisfactory state of affairs for a 21st-century country. Though there may be some advantages in such lack of definition, it means in practice that governments with a comfortable majority can in certain respects 'make it up as they go along'. Under New Labour, for example, there has been a clear weakening of Parliament and a centralisation of power in the Cabinet and the person of the Prime Minister. Dearlove and Saunders (Introduction to British Politics, 2000, p.58) comment: "At one time, the prime minister was regarded as *primus inter pares* – first among equals – but it has been argued that the power of the Prime Minister has in-

creased to such an extent that it makes better sense to talk of prime-ministerial government and a quasi-presidency”.

Former Tory Party minister Lord Hailsham’s description of the British political system as an “elective dictatorship” comes from a lecture he gave in 1976. In that lecture he criticized the constitution and called for ‘nothing less than a written constitution for the United Kingdom, and by that I mean one which limits the powers of Parliament’.

“Britain’s democracy has always been incomplete. We have never enjoyed firm guarantees of basic human rights. Our voting system has never been fair. Our system of government has always been highly centralised. Parliament has been far too subservient to the Executive. We live under a political system which, by its nature, produces arrogant and unrepresentative government”. (Policy statement at the launch of the Social and Liberal Democrats in 1988.)

Politics is party-based and confrontational rather than issue-based and consensual. The victorious party forms ‘Her Majesty’s Government’, and the next largest party the ‘official Opposition’. The form of the debating chambers in both Houses reinforces the confrontational style. The system exists primarily to maintain a monopoly on power by the three main parties, so that Britain could legitimately be termed a ‘partycracy’ rather than a democracy. The primary motivation appears to be the preservation or enhancement of the party’s ‘market share’, achieved by a focus on the delivery of identifiable and measurable ‘products’ and ‘quality of service provision’ amounting to little more than bribery of the electorate. Recently, it has emerged that both New Labour and the Conservatives have received very large amounts of money from backers (totalling around £30 million for both parties). The money was given in the form of ‘loans’ rather than ‘donations’ in order to circumvent the rules on the disclosure of all large sources of money. There is a suspicion that certain ‘honours’ (including membership of the Lords) have been awarded as a result of the lenders’ largesse.

Two-thirds of the constitutions of the countries of Europe endorse the principle of ‘popular sovereignty’: “all power derives from the people”. The British Parliament (effectively the House of Commons) traditionally claims sovereignty for itself, though given the absence of a formal constitution and the simple fact that the parliament is elected by the people and is therefore technically subservient to it, the claim lacks a sound logical basis.

Former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook wrote in 1989 (in an article for the Guardian) “The appalling insight supplied by the Thatcher experience is that there are no real checks and balances in the British Constitution. The doctrine of the sovereignty of parliament means that the tyranny of the parliamentary majority is absolute. Yes, the first-past-the-post system has given us strong government and I, for one, have had strong government up to the back teeth.”

A significant number of MPs in the current parliament appear to contest the claim: a so-called ‘Early Day Motion’ has attracted nearly 60 signatures of support for a change to the voting system. The motion declares: “This House believes that the essence of democracy is the sovereignty of the people, and that the people are entitled to choose how that sovereignty is ceded to Government on their behalf; ...” There is little chance that the motion will be debated, let alone accepted, but it represents a significant sign of a shift in perception which might one day lead to the universal acceptance of popular sovereignty. It is also

significant that there is a much stronger sense of the principle of popular sovereignty in Scotland; about which more later.

UK ‘referendum’ history

There are no direct-democratic rights at the national level in the U.K. As a result of an Act passed in 2000, there is now a local right of initiative leading to a binding referendum, but only on a single issue: the option of directly electing a local mayor. To force a referendum, the initiative group needs to collect the signatures of 5% of the local electorate. This meagre initiative right has been used a total of six times to date. All other referendums are more properly termed ‘plebiscites’, as they are initiated by the government. There has been only one national ‘referendum’ (in 1975, on joining the EEC; approved). There have been eight regional ‘referendums’, mostly on the devolution of power to the ‘old kingdoms’ of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland:

- 1973: should Northern Ireland remain in the UK? Majority ‘yes’
- 1979 (2): should Scotland and Wales have their own devolved assemblies? ‘No’
- 1997 (2): Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly? ‘Yes’
- 1998: Greater London Authority and directly elected mayor of London? ‘Yes’
- 1998: ‘Good Friday Agreement’, including an assembly for Northern Ireland. ‘Yes’
- 2004: should there be a regional assembly in the North-East of England? ‘No’

There have been 31 mayoral referendums/plebiscites (11 approved, 20 rejected). Only six of these were genuine referendums launched by a citizens’ initiative. Average turnout was only 29%, with a high of 64% and a low of 10%. There has also been an increase in the use of advisory ‘referendums’ at the local/city level e.g. the decision by the Bristol Council in 2001 to hold a local referendum on the level of council tax. Four options were presented: no increase; 2% increase; 4% increase; 6% increase, and the council announced that it would accept the result as binding. The turnout was 40.2% and a majority voted for no increase. This was the first referendum at which e-voting was used, in addition to postal and ‘freephone’ voting. (E-voting was also used in a similar referendum in Croydon).

The conduct of all national and European elections and national and regional referendums is overseen by an independent Electoral Commission, whose website states: “We are an independent body that was set up by the UK Parliament. Our mission is to foster public confidence and participation by promoting integrity, involvement and effectiveness in the democratic process.” The main functions of the Commission in respect of referendums are to: comment on the intelligibility of the question (set by government or local authority); register campaign organizations as ‘permitted participants’; appoint lead campaign organizations on both sides of the referendum question; monitor referendum expenditure limits and donations; designate the Chief Counting Officer at each referendum.

Although the Electoral Commission’s role is currently relatively restricted, its importance lies in it being independent of government and in having a structure which could fairly easily expand to meet possible future demands for more direct democracy. That it is not entirely toothless has been shown by the fact that it involved itself in the dispute over ‘loans’ mentioned above and made a clear call for transparency and accountability.

An older Act (the 1972 Local Government Act), which has only recently been 'rediscovered', permits elements of direct democracy. It applies in small communities (parishes) of England and Wales, but does not appear to apply to cities, or to Scotland and Northern Ireland. The Act states that if 10 or more people attending a parish council meeting vote for a poll on a subject of their choosing, the governing district council must agree to organize what is in effect a local referendum within the boundaries of the parish. This Act has now been invoked on a number of occasions, for example to oppose trials of genetically-modified crops.

Tentative moves in the direction of a greater acceptance of a popular right to be involved in decision-making include the introduction in 1999 of a 'public petition' system in Scotland, followed the next year by the addition (in Scotland) of a e-petition system and the introduction of e-petition systems in two English municipalities: Bristol and Kingston-upon-Thames.

Around 1000 petitions (including more than 90 e-petitions) have been submitted in Scotland to date (April 2006). Bristol has recorded 121 petitions, including 24 e-petitions; Kingston 24 petitions, including 21 e-petitions.

Whilst petitions (with no guarantee of being considered, and no possibility of a referendum vote on the issue) can hardly qualify as direct democracy, in terms of the very rigid and archaic British political system these developments are nonetheless significant. Perhaps from such small acorns oaks may eventually grow. They give at least some members of the public an experience of presenting a substantive issue to parliament or the local authority, and in some cases backing this up with a collection of signatures. Though it remains a carefully controlled part of a top-down representative system, the Scottish petition system is admirably 'user-friendly'. Any person or group may submit a petition; there are very few restrictions on subject-matter (issues must be within the competence of the devolved parliament); petitions can be posted free of charge at any post office, or even handed in formally, by arrangement, for publicity purposes! Information on the scheme is available in six languages and petitions may in fact be submitted in any language, including Braille. There is excellent coverage of the scheme online, including an archive of all petitions submitted. Petitioners may be able to make a personal presentation to the Public Petitions Committee (a cross-party group of MSPs dealing only with petitions).

The committee has full and final discretion to deal with petitions as it sees fit. There is no right of appeal. The committee may consult the Scottish Executive (government) or other relevant body; it may request a minister or a representative of a body to give evidence; it may decide that the issue merits further action and formally refer the petition to a subject committee of the Parliament or other body; it may recommend to the Parliamentary Bureau that the petition should be debated at a meeting of the parliament; it may decide that the issues raised do not merit further action; or it may decide to take any other action as appropriate.

The Scottish Parliament is clearly proud of its petitions system. It is pro-active in publicising it, and its website lists some of its achievements: it has resulted in a change to laws (e.g. a ban on the spreading of untreated organic waste on land); petitions have been included in wider reviews and inquiries; petitions may initiate parliamentary debates, prompt action by the Executive and other public bodies (e.g. in the speeding up of the compensation process for victims of as-

bestosis) and help in the scrutiny of legislation (e.g. land reform, criminal justice, national parks).

Both standard and e-petitions can be submitted by individuals or groups. E-petitions are hosted on the Parliament's website for an agreed period, providing an opportunity to attract a much wider audience and gather more names in support of the petition. Each e-petition has its own discussion forum, where visitors and supporters can discuss and debate the petition and related issues. When the agreed period for hosting a petition on-line ends, the petition is then formally submitted to the PPC for consideration in the usual way. The following issues have been the subject of e-petitions: a campaign to save the 7:84 theatre company (so-called to reflect the fact that at the time of its founding 7% of the Scottish population owned 84% of the land); renewable energy; rights for people with autism; parliamentary standards; parental access rights for children; a new Forth Road Bridge; a moratorium on the 'Public-Private-Partnership' model for building new schools; ecovillages; local authority democratic accountability; the provision of affordable housing – a typical cross-section of public concerns which in Switzerland and other places could be the subject of a formal initiative and binding referendum system.

In November 2006, the Prime Minister's office considerably expanded its e-petition system, which was introduced in 2001. The figures are remarkable: from November 2006 to February 2007 (four months) more than 3,381 petitions were filed, with more than 2,500,000 signatures. The managers of the system are apologizing for delays because the system is overloaded – they have had a peak of 150 hits per second!

Power to the people

The original definition of democracy by Thucydides makes clear that it is essentially about the apportionment of the power of decision-making in society ("Our Constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands, not of a minority, but of the greatest number"). That recognition may have been the reason for the naming of the 'Power' inquiry – an independent inquiry into British democracy, funded by the charitable Rowntree Trust and launched in 2004 under the chairmanship of the redoubtable Helena Kennedy QC, a Labour peer. Its report, entitled "Power to the People", was published in February 2006. It makes very interesting reading.

Helena Kennedy summarised the key findings of the report in an article for The Independent newspaper on 27th February 2006: "The people are not the problem. They are interested in politics. They care about the bread-and-butter issues that affect their lives. They care about their communities and neighbourhoods, their country and the world – but they are totally alienated from the political system. Formal democracy is failing the people.

The political class does not realize how deep the alienation runs. Fundamental reform is needed if we are to re-establish a democracy fit for a 21st-century People. 'Power to the People' calls for three essential shifts: more power to the people; more power to parliament; more electoral choice.

There has to be a new emphasis on public engagement in politics. All public bodies should be required to involve citizens in their decision-making processes. Clear processes are needed which allow people to challenge decisions and set the agenda. That is why we recommend the use of a far-reaching Citizens'

Initiative, through which people can launch their own local and national referendums, public enquiries and hearings.

The overweening dominance of the Executive has to be checked. Our voting system allows parties to maintain a monopolistic grip on political power. We need electoral reform that will widen the choice for voters and let new voices and alliances emerge. These three shifts, involving 30 recommendations ... will blow open the cosy Westminster consensus that citizens require little more out of democracy than a choice between two broad political programmes once every four years. The shifts will download power, and that is what the people want". (The report can be downloaded at www.powerinquiry.org.)

Moreover, in 2006 the Our Say campaign, chaired by actress Saira Khan, has started a petition asking for introduction of binding citizen-initiated referendums. It is supported by prominent people from several sectors of society.

It remains to be seen what effect these initiatives will have on a system essentially dedicated to preserving the status quo, whilst making token gestures in the direction of 'participation'. In the days after the Power report was published, all the major party leaders made verbal commitments to greater public participation in decision-making. This is nothing new: in the 1979 Conservative party manifesto, Margaret Thatcher stated: "All energy developments raise important environmental issues, and we shall ensure the fullest public participation in major new decisions." Nothing more was heard of this after the election and there has never been a full public debate on the country's overall energy policy – a matter of increasing concern to all states in the era of Peak Oil.

Future prospects

What are the prospects for more direct democracy in Britain? The future is uncertain. A move in the direction of decentralisation of power was made with the creation of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies. All of these have introduced fairer voting systems, allowing a wider spread of representation, but the hopes of a more radical shift away from the 'Westminster model' have not so far been realized. Polls show that citizens do not believe that devolution has brought significant change in the political modus operandi. The petition system in Scotland is a welcome innovation, but, as noted above, it remains tightly controlled within the representative system, despite Scotland having a historical political culture which implicitly endorses the principle of popular sovereignty – as reflected in the 'key principles' outlined by the Consultative Steering Group in its recommendations for the form of the new Scottish Parliament:

- the Scottish Parliament should embody and reflect the sharing of power between the people of Scotland, the legislators and the Scottish Executive;
- the Scottish Executive should be accountable to the Scottish Parliament and the Parliament and Executive should be accountable to the people of Scotland;
- the Scottish Parliament should be accessible, open, responsive, and develop procedures which make possible a participative approach to the development, consideration and scrutiny of policy and legislation;
- the Scottish Parliament in its operation and its appointments should recognise the need to promote equal opportunities for all.

These principles were "fully endorsed" by both Parliament and Executive in 1999, but the implicit acknowledgement of popular sovereignty was explicitly undermined a year or so later by a parliamentary committee tasked with assessing how well the 'key principles' had been implemented. The committee effectively downgraded the importance of the first principle – the sharing of power. In the 2003 report of the Procedures Committee we read: "It was clear to us that the CSG principles did focus very much on the Parliament, and were based heavily on a model of 'participative democracy'. The traditional model of 'representative democracy' seemed to the CSG to be breaking down as a workable model in Scotland prior to devolution, and indeed to be under pressure all across the western world, as electoral turnouts and active citizen involvement in political parties and electoral politics declined. Devolution on its own would not reinvigorate politics. The CSG model of participative democracy was meant to win legitimacy for the new devolved institutions, to empower civil society and the people of Scotland directly, and to rebuild active engagement between the people and those charged with legislation and government. It seemed to us that the CSG's aspirations were tempered by a recognition of the need to compromise in 'the real world'." In effect, the Committee (composed solely of parliamentarians) was renouncing effective power-sharing.

Britain remains at heart a conservative nation, still locked to a high degree into past 'glories' (the Empire, being on the 'winning side' in two world wars) which, together with its status as a major economic power, help to make its politicians pretentious, arrogant and unwilling to take a leaf out of anyone else's book – except perhaps the USA, towards which it is often very imitative.

As things currently stand, there is a slim chance that the next general election (probably 2008) might produce the first 'hung parliament', with the Liberal Democrats holding the balance of power. There would then be a chance of the unfair first-past-the-post system for Westminster elections at last being consigned to history – though it would take another four years or so for such a change to produce a wider spread of representation. It remains to be seen whether the 'Power Inquiry' and the Our Say campaign will produce any real momentum for change, especially given the considerable influence on popular thinking of a grossly unbalanced and distorted media coverage of political issues.

"Only recently have we awakened to see not only that 'regular citizens' have the capacity for self-governance, but that without their engagement our huge global crises cannot be addressed. The changes needed for human society simply to survive, let alone thrive, are so profound that the only way we will move toward them is if we ourselves – regular citizens – feel meaningful ownership of solutions through direct engagement." (Frances Moore Lappé)

"If diverse ordinary people are given adequate information and a chance to deeply hear each other and reflect together about public affairs ... there is a natural tendency to come to see a larger picture together, through each others' eyes, and to then wrestle in good faith with the implications of that larger picture ... so that in the end they find that their diversity is a resource, stimulating each other into remarkable creativity. Suddenly options that make sense to all or most of them emerge – possibilities often unseen by any of them when they began talking." (Tom Atlee)