

## Democracy International ECI Speech

My fellow Democracy International members, honored guests, and friends of direct democracy from across the globe,

I'd like to talk to you tonight about a theory I first heard in California's Silicon Valley. A theory that some of our leading thinkers on technological matters advance. It is called the theory of singularity. And it says this: that as machines become more complex and more intelligent, they will eventually reach a point at which they are so complex and intelligent that they will be smarter than humans. At that point, we will not be able to govern the machines. The machines will govern us.

In California, we have already achieved a dubious kind of singularity. Our system of government – particularly the pieces that involve our budget and money – has become so complicated that we citizens, and those we elect, can no longer govern it. And this state of affairs is our own fault. This complex governing system has been authored not just by parties, not just by interest groups not just by the legislature – but by the people themselves, over a century, using their power under our state's direct democracy to impose whatever laws or constitutional amendments they wish. All the hundreds of constitutional amendments and initiatives with spending mandates and tax limits have combined – in ways unintended by the authors of each measure – into a machine beyond our control.

Life in such a place is full of paradoxes. To take just one: Our constitution requires a balanced budget but all the rules of our constitution make a balanced budget impossible. So in California: what is constitutionally required is constitutionally prohibited.

The machine of governance that voters have created over the decades rules us now.

Californians have spent much of my adult life attempting to fix this machine we've created. We even elected as our governor a movie star famous for playing a machine who could destroy other machines.

Nothing has worked.

There are many lessons in our California story for the rest of the world. The simplest is: don't design systems of direct democracy that look like California's. Ours is the most inflexible on the planet. We don't leave room for fixing of errors or compromise on the front end of our process – and we generally don't permit the legislative body to alter initiatives once they have passed. We do everything in a great hurry. As the people in this room know, the best direct democratic systems are carefully and responsibly integrated with representative democracy. I hope California will redesign its system along those lines someday.

But there is a trickier, harder lesson for all of us in California's failure. It has to do with a truth apparent to anyone who has watched American TV and seen all the advertisements for Viagra and other pharmaceuticals that supposedly help men with the delicate problem of erectile dysfunction.

And that lesson is: Size matters.

But size doesn't matter in quite the way those TV advertisements mean. Being big is, yes, useful for some things. But it is a terrible problem for democracy.

Californians are not Dr. Frankensteins. We didn't set out to build a governing monster. We tried to build a democracy, but didn't account for our own size, and rapid growth. The 120-person legislature that we adopted in 1879 gave Californians close connections to their elected representatives, because we had fewer than one million people back then. That same 120-person legislature now represents 38 million people, and your chances of cashing a winning ticket in our state lottery – the lottery itself is a creation of our direct democracy – are better than your chances of meeting your elected representative.

Our direct democracy has suffered from the same failure to adjust for scale. The initiative, referendum and recall rules that fit us in 1911 – our direct democracy will be a century old on Oct. 10 – no longer fit us today. Our signature standards, based

on a percentage of voters, now require more than a million signatures, and millions of dollars. Communicating with voters requires tens of millions more in cash. And so we've turned our petition circulation and signature gathering and ballot initiative and referendum campaigns into machines, machines of money and media and technology that broadcast messages to millions. Most initiative campaigns barely bother anymore with human to human contact. Phone calls to voters are made not by humans, but by computers, who play taped messages, often into our voice mail boxes.

This tendency for direct democracy to become mechanized is not a problem just for the state of California, but for any large polity, whether it's a big city or a fast-growing province or prefecture. And it is an inescapable danger for anyone daring enough to build an initiative process for, say, a continent of 500 million. The momentum for mechanization and bigness is natural. And the temptation to build big democratic systems is huge. After all, isn't power big? The world's powerful governments and multinational institutions and multinational corporations are big, so why not a big direct democratic machine for the people to wield?

I have traveled from the biggest state in a very big country to warn you: Size may be your friend in the bedroom but size is the enemy of good citizenship. Yes, we must challenge the Goliaths of the globe. But we must make sure that the rocks we seek to hurl at the bad guys aren't too big for our slingshots.

Now the people in this room come from all over the globe. They have different backgrounds and different views. Direct democracy activists often are—I dare say—opinionated. Argumentative. Sometimes difficult. So it is a hard thing to get everyone to agree on what we have in common. But still we must ask: what is our shared mission here? What are our shared values?

Well, since I'm an American, and since I have an obligation to uphold my country's reputation for arrogance, let me straight out tell you what our shared goal should be.

To build a direct democracy around the world that, no matter the size of the place where it exists, operates on a human scale.

I propose that this be the test of every democratic institution we build: does each direct democracy system encourage human-to-human interaction? Are its rules simple and easy to understand, so that everyone may access it? Does it promote conversation? Does it force us to talk, and bargain and compromise on a personal level? Does it bring us together?

If the answer to these questions is no, then the direct democratic system in question must be sent back to the factory for redesign. Because a direct democracy that doesn't exist on this human scale isn't merely a problem or an inconvenience. We know from history that direct democratic machines are dangerous – not least to democracy itself.

This is a room full of people who make big plans in their heads. That's fine. But big thinkers must be careful. We must remind ourselves constantly of what we know in our hearts: that the most beautiful things in life – be they a place, a moment, or a child – are small.

We meet here tonight as a small group in a world that is too big. And it is precisely because we are a small coalition that we are powerful.

So let us help the world do what it is we are doing here in Brussels. Let us talk and share and exchange and compromise and work, one human interaction at a time, to make this planet a more prosperous, more peaceful and more democratic place.

Because if we don't, the machines may win.