

# SPEAKERS COMMISSION ON DIGITAL DEMOCRACY: REPRESENTATION

SUBMISSION OF EVIDENCE 28<sup>th</sup> July 2014

BY DAVID FARNSWORTH

*Consultant in city planning, urban development, neighbourhood regeneration and community involvement, Bristol.*

## **The demand for greater involvement**

Before diving into an answer as to how digital technology can or should be used to improve public engagement in politics we ought to consider what kind of engagement the public wishes to have.

For most citizens, the digital age means unprecedented direct and personal access to worldwide information and expertise, the facility to broadcast and exchange views within the UK and across the world and the ability to mobilise opinion and action among large numbers of fellow citizens. This is all independent of the "representative" Parliamentary system. In effect the "playing field" of decision-making power between politicians, professional experts, and the public is being levelled towards communities and the citizen.

Meanwhile the appetite for political news and concern for the state of the nation among the general public seems to be as high as ever. The digital era has fuelled both the demand for and ability to exercise citizen informed choice over the major aspects of quality of life: health, justice, education and the quality of place in which we live. Across all of these areas and across all countries, new forms of citizen involvement in decision-making are developing through such mechanisms and ideas as participatory budgeting\*<sup>1</sup>, slow democracy, neighbourhood place-making, co-design, co-production and direct environmental action. Cross-party political thought is turning to devolution of powers and budgets from Whitehall to regions and cities.

Recent legislation in England\*<sup>2</sup> has in essence brought many of these principles into planning law. Parish and Town Councils and Forums of residents in non-parish urban areas have exclusive power to create neighbourhood plans using a process of deliberative democracy. Once approved by a local referendum of electors, the plan is made part of the legally binding Local Plan.

What is increasingly demanded by electorates is informed choice. The concept of informed choice has good provenance, for example in how GPs now advise patients on alternative treatments, how lawyers advise juries on the choice of verdict and how supermarkets offer informed value for money choices. There is widespread international evidence from community involvement practice and academic research that to achieve such informed choice requires 5 tests to be satisfied:

1. Inclusion – equality of access across all citizens and interest groups
2. Timing – conducted at a point in decision-making when options are still open
3. Consensus – hearing and knowing the deliberations of fellow citizens
4. Deliberation – a considered choice between options based on an appraisal of their relative impacts and implications
5. Clear result – knowing that the chosen option has been taken or if not, why not

The core of informed choice is deliberation: the considered choice between alternative courses of action based upon as much relevant information as possible, including the views of fellow citizens.

Simply using digital methods to increase the amount, time, place or convenience in the flow of information to the public is not enough.

### **What the present Parliamentary system seems to offer**

The Parliamentary system is increasingly seen as remote from citizens. Parliamentary candidates and their policy agendas are largely chosen by political parties. Party manifestos are only a crude representation of citizens concerns and most citizens have no say in their content. MPs go on to be elected mostly on a minority vote under the first past the post system. MPs vote in Parliament in a way that is obscure and seemingly random, sometimes by party instruction, sometimes by conscience and sometimes by constituency request. In any event, Government policies and decisions often have no direct relationship to electoral manifestos or campaigns.

Many MPs use email newsletters and Web sites to feedback their activity but not to feedback performance against manifesto promises. Departmental consultation exercises fail to link views given with action taken. Direct accountability happens only once every 5 years.

As the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee points out, turnout at general elections has been falling to a low of 59% in 2001 and an estimated 6.5 million electors are not registered. Most citizens feel disconnected from the political system. From the citizens' point of view the present system is no longer fit for the purpose of "informed choice". The principle of representative democracy itself is in question. A new settlement is needed.

### **How can digital technology help?**

Edmund Burke\*<sup>3</sup> argued for the principle that an MP must be free to use "*unbiased opinion, conviction of judgement and enlightened conscience*" and not be bound to obey "*authoritative instructions and mandates issued*" by constituents who might be "*300 hundred miles distant from hearing the arguments*" He asked "*what sort of reason is that in which the determination precedes the discussion?*"

In 2014 citizen awareness and the digital era fundamentally change the relationship between constituents and MPs that Burke set out, yet to many citizens Parliament and MPs still seem to operate on those 240 year old principles. Many citizens are resigned to saying "they will do what they want so why should we bother"

When Burke argued that "*Parliament is not a Congress of Ambassadors..... but a deliberative Assembly*", there may have been reason then, but there is no reason now why that "deliberative assembly" should not within limits be devolved to constituents using the principle and practice of informed choice.

One way to begin to do this that digital communication makes possible is:

Each MP organises an email-based standing "assembly" Forum of constituents.

The purpose of the Forum is to deliberate upon national policy choices put forward either by the MP or by members of the Forum following wider consultation in the constituency, partly through the web.

The Forum operates on the 5 principles of informed choice, including that it is open to any constituent to join - with a limit of say 20 members at any one time for purely practical reasons of organising debates.

The Forum meets say every 2 months throughout the period of the Parliament.

To avoid the development of cliques, the membership of the Forum would be re-opened at least once a year and individual constituents could only be a member for 2 years in succession.

The MP would put forward policy choices based the timetable of Parliamentary business and other policies that the MP wishes to pursue that have a reasonable chance of becoming legislation in that Parliament.

The MP gives advice, opinion and recommendations to the Forum on the choices available so that the group can arrive at an informed choice of policy.

The MP would still be completely free to exercise judgement or conscience on whether to agree with the forums choices, including reasons of party politics, but of course would be expected to give reasons "why not" to the Forum and would be accountable to the wider electorate at the next election.

Records of all the deliberations are published on the MP's constituency web site.

The web site is also used to both invite comment and to conduct regular surveys of constituency opinion on policy options and choices to supplement and inform Forum deliberations.

The MP would report back to the forum and through the website to the wider constituency on the outcome of Parliamentary decisions relevant to the choices made.

A programme of training for forum members in decision-making/policy formation might be considered by individual constituencies depending on their inclination and resources. However there is considerable evidence that a rise in the capacity of citizens to be involved in such a decision-making process best occurs simply through taking a direct part in the process.

## **David Farnsworth 28 July 2014**

### References

\*<sup>1</sup> Participatory budgeting as a method for involving the electorate in decisions on public spending is now practiced in over 2,000 towns and cities across the world on a wide range of types and scales of budget. Essentially the method conforms to the principles of informed choice in four main steps: 1. the whole community is asked to select its spending priorities and to select delegates to a working forum 2. With the help of experts, delegates develop options for spending on those priorities 3. Those options are put to a direct vote by the electorate 4. State authorities implement the top options that are selected.

\*<sup>2</sup> Localism Act 2011.

\*<sup>3</sup> Speech by Edmund Burke to the electors of Bristol on being duly elected one of the representatives in Parliament for that city November 1774.