

In search of democracy: from representative to participative and back again

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Combatative, militaristic metaphors seem to have become standard fare in politics since 2016. There has been no end of politicians who in “standing up for the British people” elicit the mythical Blitz spirit. This has even seen them take the unpalatable step of attempting contemporary references in efforts to connect with the electorate. Theresa May’s use of Liverpool’s stunning 4-0 victory over Barcelona as an expression of her own dogged resolve was ill advised at the time; even more so considering Tottenham’s similarly impressive 3-2 comeback against Ajax has meant the battle for Europe is now essentially England playing off against itself. If ever a metaphor was spaffed up the wall...

The transference of such combatative metaphors into the public consciousness has led to a pretty low point in British politics. MPs position as public servants seems increasingly interpreted as justification to subject them to abuse. This tendency is underwritten by the fact we, as taxpayers, ‘pay their wages’. Which of course, is broadly true of just about anything. I regularly travel by Virgin Trains and suffer the discomfort of standing in overcrowded carriages – does this justify me trolling Richard Branson with threats of sexual abuse? (The answer is no, by the way).

Of course, the real issue emerging here is the possessive nature of representative democracy. The black and white essence of a two-way vote fundamentally fails to address any nuance within the issue presented. We therefore end up living in a binary, segmented into two specific groups fundamentally unrepresentative of the complex social, economic and political dynamic we inhabit.

The emergence of anger as a political force, underwritten by cries of betrayal by an out-of-touch political class, are justified by the referendum result. Similarly justified are calls for its annulment with

legitimate cases of deceit and illegality within the Leave campaign. But what these also represent is an increased level of detachment between the public – civil society – and political. With a growing sense of impotence amongst the public regarding their ability to influence political decision making, ballot box selection is translated into possession of representatives, who are thus interpreted as fair game when it emerges there is a difference between how the individual, the collective, and the representative interpret a course of action. Particularly one where ambiguity was its greatest weapon.

What this illustrates more than anything is the regression of democracy into its purely representative form. This plays very neatly into the more imperialistic voices of Farage and Rees-Mogg, whose version of democracy promises grandeur by proxy with ill-defined detail, be it through a course of action specific (leaving the EU) or nebulous (making a country 'great' again). All they ask in return for your vote is complete subservience. This tendency is also however a foundation for much of the dissatisfaction with the social fabric of modern Britain.

We had been moving away from this and toward a more participative form of democracy. The Local Government Act 2000 gave local authorities a statutory responsibility to engage wider community interests through Local Strategic Partnerships. These Partnership's were charged with creating, via broader community engagement, community plans which would inform local planning policies, the design of and investment in localised services, and feed upwards to influence the activities of the newly created Regional Development Agencies alongside Government departments. Such policies helped dramatic changes in the landscape of the UK, with Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield, Newcastle all transformed. Their influence unfortunately only reached so far, and gains for these core cities are often interpreted through marginalisation and stagnation in the secondary centres of Brexit Central: Sunderland, Stoke, Burnley.

These issues of the decline of communities and its impact on identity are hugely material in charting dissatisfaction. But separating the public from the political places too much emphasis on the power of elected officials and formal office. One of my fellow bloggers at CBS recently posted on the responsibility of citizens to vote.[\[1\]](#) I have never failed to vote since turning 18. I also however disagree with this

sentiment to some extent. In almost 30 years of voting it has taken me until 2015 to finally have a direct representative for whom I voted (outside the European Parliament that is). Democratic responsibility therefore has to be more than simply voting. It has to be about becoming engaged and thus a direct participator in forming and maintaining community fabric.

I'll digress slightly with a personal take on this. My parents enjoy their dotage in sleepy rural Sussex. My father, despite socialist leanings and desire for industrial nationalisation, is an ardent Leaver. My mother dislikes any state interference but is fundamentally Pro-EU. These positions mirror their optimism about the future, my father more pessimistic of the 'state of things' than my mother. These positions are also linked to their level of community engagement. Whilst my father splits his time between the garden and the golf course, fundamentally engaged in singularly personal pursuits, my mother runs a local crafts group providing a community point of contact for locals often at risk of isolation alongside volunteering at a nearby country centre for adults with learning difficulties. So whilst one sees change in top-down terms, through which our lives are determined by isolated politicians and bureaucrats, the other sees it through a form of direct community action through which responsibility sits not with abstract institutions of the state or the market, but through a mix of individual and collective action and participation.

Perhaps this is a lesson for us all. Democracy has become a much maligned term of late. As a representative practice, it has huge limitations, particularly in the highly centralised, first-past-the-post system we have in the UK. At the national level, and in many constituencies around the country, the majority of us will be marginalised rather than represented through this system. Therefore the only way of becoming effectively involved in the democratic process is through participation. This means more than turning up to rallies and marches, displaying expensively-branded placards in a mode sickeningly reflective of the lowest form of US politics and shouting malcontent at those in Office. It means contributing to community fabric, building social capital in your local areas, identifying tangible issues you wish to address (not unelected bureaucrats or bendy bananas). I guess more than anything, it means becoming a citizen rather than a voter.

[1] <https://centreforbrexitstudiesblog.wordpress.com/2019/04/29/dont-complain-if-you-dont-vote/>