

Institutional democracy will strengthen our society, engaging citizenry and distributing power equitably

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Mike O'Donnell *argues that institutionalising people's involvement in matters that affect their daily lives would surely act as an antidote to the apathy and disengagement that blights liberal democracy. It would also serve to create a more equitable society, one where government is not dominated by wealthy elites. The challenge, though, is in initiating reform.*



In a [previous contribution](#) on this site I suggested that British democracy is not so fine a model that it is beyond radical improvement. I argued that what I term *institutional democracy* offers a significant route to democratic enhancement and reform. Institutional democracy exists when all those with a major stake in an institution or network of institutions have significant decision-making power in determining its values and goals and in the main aspects of its operation.

Here I briefly consider why there is a degree of complacency about British democracy and extend the arguments supporting institutional democracy. The reasons for complacency differ reflecting specific traditions of political thought. The emphasis of liberal philosophy remains on representative democracy. In a recent lecture in honour of the late David Butler, Peter Kellner gave an impressive defence of representative democracy but said little about how democracy might be extended to enable people to access power more routinely and effectively than in the present system. Apart from the very occasional and specific employment of certain forms of direct democracy Kellner is content to let 'expert' elected political elites exercise power.

Liberal constitutional reformers have been effective in promoting human rights legislation and in advocating replacing the House of Lords with a more democratically representative institution. I agree with the thrust of these policies but reform at the grassroots is also needed. Institutional democracy would complement representative democracy and has the potential to revitalise it. Institutionalising people's involvement in matters that affect their daily lives would surely act as an antidote to the apathy and disengagement that blights liberal democracy.

Historically, socialist philosophy has been defined more as the pursuit of material equality and equality of cultural access than as a vehicle for promoting democracy. That has been its tragedy, most particularly in the Soviet bloc. The main achievement of Western socialist parties has been in promoting the welfare state although it has been no bar to recent sharp increases in inequality. A wide distribution of power is an end in itself, promoting engagement and responsibility and as a safeguard against elite self-interest and corruption.

However, a redistribution of power would be likely to assist the pursuit of equality. It is naïve and contradicts historical example to imagine that elites might substantially redistribute their wealth as long as they have the power not to do so. The best prospect for the redistribution of wealth is the redistribution of power. Assuming that the majority would act in their own interests just as the elites do, they would seek a redistribution of income and wealth albeit that this may be a gradual and cumulative process.

Social democracy, reflecting the traditions of liberal and socialist reformism, has relied on the state to introduce a more equal society. The introduction of institutional democracy would require the role of the central state, but it is the institutional changes themselves that would entrench the promotion of equality by empowering the majority of citizens on a routine basis. The wealthy elites seem well able to counter the fiscal measures parliament takes to raise a more adequate contribution from

them and will very probably continue to do so.

In the context of the growth of national and global inequality, it becomes a pertinent to ask whether parliament really is fully 'in power'? Recently the fiftieth anniversary of the independent radical Charles Wright Mills has stimulated a reconsideration of his thought including his contention that parliamentary/congressional institutions predominantly operate at a middle level of power rather than at the apex which, in his view, is dominated by the economic (including commercial press), political and military elites – the power elite. The relevance of this analysis to our own period hardly requires labouring.

If national governments seem unable to do much to change rampant inequality, what chance has the implementation of institutional democracy to do so? The answer, in the short term, is not much. The introduction of institutional democracy is not a short-term fix but a long-term policy based on practicality and principle. What parliamentary legislation can do is to change the system to release the people's latent energy and competence.

There are a number of difficulties. Firstly, the implementation of institutional democracy across industry, including finance, the public services, pre-eminently in education, and in the voluntary sector (where some organisations have adopted directorial models) will require the committed support of a political party. The Labour Party is the only feasible possibility. For it to do so will require a change in its culture. The Blair-Brown era, despite some progressive constitutional reforms, was dirigiste in its mode of government. Apparently untrusting of democracy, they tried to control it. It is not clear that Ed Miliband has the conviction or even the confidence to implement a policy as radical as is suggested here. Secondly, the implementation of legislation introducing this policy would take a considerable time, including training.

Thirdly, doubtless many will regard institutional democracy will as naively utopian. In fact it is based on hard experience and realistic thinking. The hard experience refers not only to the recalcitrance of elites but to persistent public political indifference. Yet, if people feel powerless to act against elite domination it is partly because they are. Institutional democracy on the scale advocated here transfers significant power to individuals who previously have had little. Collectively they will have the opportunity to make a difference that is meaningful to them.

However, disengagement is also the product of lack of knowledge and experience as well as opportunity. Much educational philosophy, including Dewey and Freire, argues that experience is the best teacher. To return to Mills: far from indulging in romantic populism, he thought it obvious that the dual impact of an inadequate education system and a largely low-grade media undermined the knowledge and competence of the population. What was apparent in the nineteen fifties America is equally so in twenty first century Britain. The introduction of institutional democracy from schools outwards will be a giant step to addressing these issues.

The recent unrest among many young people reflects a desire to make an impact, to affect and even occupy power. However it is easy to exaggerate the potential of social media and street protests in achieving change. Radical change still requires what Rudi Dutschke referred to as 'the long hard march through the institutions'. For that the coming generation will require the services of a political party.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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