

Democratic practice could be institutionalised in private and public spheres to help develop political debate and deliberation

Blog Admin

Andrew Harding presents some ideas of how democratic practice can be institutionalized by involving and engaging citizens in decision making in all areas of society.



Britain is regarded as a democratic state, yet most people only engage in democracy when they vote in a general election every four to five years. A strong case can be built to suggest that people 'don't do democracy', or engage in democratic practice, enough. To an extent voices are lost, or misplaced in translation. However, more often than not they are simply not heard.

Mike O'Donnell wrote a timely piece on this blog [last week](#) suggesting that engaging citizens through institutional democracy, can "...act as an antidote to the apathy and disengagement that blights liberal democracy." O'Donnell suggests, like any reform, the challenge is in the doing. Public involvement and engagement is met with a hint of cynicism by many, but my research suggests that a large proportion of citizens welcome the idea of becoming involved in institutional governance. While the Big Society has (re)introduced the idea of public engagement, I suggest it has been poorly positioned and fails to reflect the public mood. Here I discuss some ideas of how democratic practice can be institutionalised in a variety of settings.

Opportunities for democratic practice exist in three key areas. O'Donnell suggested that institutionalising democratic practice in schools would serve to lay a foundation for citizens to carry on democratic ideals throughout their lives. This can be regarded as the first key area. However, enacting this seems largely redundant if opportunities for engaging in democratic practice are not available in the society that junior citizens will inhabit. The other key areas are more familiar; the public and private spheres. We do not have to look far in order to look for ways and means to institutionalise democracy in the private and public spheres.

An idea that runs parallel to O'Donnell's idea of institutionalising democratic practices in schools is the suggestion, by the late Iris Young (who built on Carol Pateman's classic *Participation and Democratic Theory* text), that the workplace is a valuable opportunity for citizens to learn and exercise democratic skills. Young's arguments chime with O'Donnell's – in order to engage in democratic practice, debate and deliberation are skills that have to be learnt and practiced.

Examples of democratic practice in the workplace are closer than you might think. The private firm modeled on the employee engagement of a co-operative model is a powerful and well established idea. In the co-operative, the whole operation, from top to bottom, is the subject of debate and deliberation between employees of all pay grades, and not just managers and owners. While perhaps co-operatives are not that well established in the UK, they prosper and are fairly commonplace in Germany. After the financial crisis, nurturing a more sustainable economy is a popular topic among UK commentators. Ensuring as many voices are heard as possible would seem an ideal place from which to start.

There can be no doubt that institutionalising democratic practice in the private sphere presents the greatest challenge. Enforcing structures of employee engagement on the firm may smack of the state overstepping its mark. Yet, there would seem to be ways and means of encouraging it – for instance, via minor tax incentives. Reformers could show that they mean business by creating forms of substantial citizen involvement in the public sphere. But, where to begin?

[Citizens' juries](#) are an excellent example of how public involvement can be implemented in the provision of public services. Between 12 and 20 jurors are facilitated toward engaging with information and participating in activities such as examining stakeholders with affected interests. This takes place over three to four days, after which the jurors make their recommendations known. Previous research and pilots from The King's Fund and IPPR in the mid to late 90s suggests that citizens' juries in the NHS (for example) could provide well informed public involvement in decision making that is capable of being included in, or running parallel to, established organisational decision making. The recent Health and Social Care Act makes a provision for at least two lay representatives in the newly formed Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs).

Part of a recent research project that I have completed sought to enquire if people would be prepared to participate on such a citizens' jury in the NHS. The results were pleasing for advocates of public involvement. After indicating whether people agreed or disagreed with the activities involved in participating, interest between participating and not participating was evenly split (n=174). It seems that enough interest exists to create much more formal, structured and effective forms of public involvement than placing two lay members onto CCGs. Whether these results can be applied to involvement in other areas of public service provision seems an area for further research.

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About the author

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