

Reinventing Democracy

by
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The Evolution of Democracy

For over 4500 years, democracy has been in flux. John Keane in his formidable “The Life and Death of Democracy” tracks the historical development of democracy, “considered both as a way of deciding things and as a whole way of life”.¹ He shows how democracy has evolved through at least the following stages:

Assembly democracy (from around 2500 BC): The first phase of democracy was self-government through public assemblies of equals accompanied by a variety of governance mechanisms designed to curb the power of kings and “bossy rulers”. This form of democracy was “scattered across many different soils and climes, ranging from the Indian subcontinent and the prosperous Phoenician empire to the western shores of provincial Europe”. Many of these innovations happened in the Islamic world which “poured scorn on kingship” and attempted to cultivate “self-governing associations”.

Representative democracy (from around 1000 AD): The second phase of democracy evolved in a rather chaotic fashion in “the Atlantic region – the watery geographic triangle that stretched from the shores of Europe across to Baltimore and New York down to Caracas, Montevideo and Buenos Aires”. Shaped by forces as diverse as “the rebirth of towns, religious struggles within the Christian Church and revolutions in the Low Countries (1581), England (1644), Sweden (1720) and America (1776) democracy came to be understood as *representative democracy*”. Political writers in the eighteenth century argued that assembly democracy must always eventually collapse into chaos and violence and that “in true democracy...one acts through deputies who are authorised by election” and who are constrained by written constitutions and laws, enforced by independent judiciaries and standing armies. The “elected representative temporarily ‘in office’ was seen as a positive substitute for power personified in the body of unelected monarchs and tyrants”.

Compared with previous assembly-based form, representative democracy could easily be scaled up to enable governance of a geographically much larger nation or state. However, there were (and still are) constant arguments about who should be allowed to vote and about how elected representatives should properly divine and represent the will of “the people”.

Monitory democracy (since World War II): There was, according to Keane, a “worldwide rebirth of democratic politics...immediately after World War Two” which has “already pushed democracy beyond familiar horizons, into unfamiliar territory”. Democracy has now become a global force, with its language, ideals and institutions becoming familiar to peoples of all nationality, religion, and geography. From a situation where, in 1941, there were only eleven democracies left on the face of the earth, democracy has “bounced back from oblivion”. By the end of the twentieth century, 119 countries (out of a total of 192) could claim to be some form of electoral democracy.

What is emerging now, according to Keane in 2009 when he was writing, is a post-Westminster form of democracy that he labels “*monitory democracy*”. This form embodies the hundreds of different types of “power-monitoring devices that never existed within the old democracy”; e.g. special interest lobby groups, NGOs, public commissions and forums, think-tanks, international covenants, earth watch organisations, bloggers, whistleblowers, legal class actions, and many novel forms of media scrutiny.

Causes and Effects of Monitory Democracy

The unplanned evolution of the monitory form of democracy in the last half of the twentieth century has been driven by the growing diversity, reach and power of many constituents of modern democratic societies. These big players, reflecting their societies’ (typically) Western values of individualistic capitalism, strive to massage the democratic system to serve their own ends. Nickolai Hubble, after reviewing the increasingly violent protests around the world against the attempts by democratically elected governments to restore balance to national budgets asks: “Do we sense a crumbling of majority rule in favour of unalienable rights?”² Hubble does not elaborate on what human rights truly are “unalienable” but he implies that today they are anything that individuals in supposedly affluent nations have become used to, such as retiring at a certain age.

Monitory democracy may also be a governance form that has been shaped by a trend towards growing narcissism in certain age groups. Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, and Bushman (2008) analysed the findings of many studies of narcissism since the 1980s.³ Their analysis revealed that narcissism has indeed increased over time in specific age groups. For example, the average college student in 2006 generated a higher level of narcissism than 65% of college students in the 1980s. They were more likely to endorse items like “I think I am a special person” and “I can live my life any way I want to”. Narcissistic people are more likely than others to react aggressively and defensively when they believe their interests are under threat. We can also assume that they will be among the more active political agents in a monitory democracy.

The plethora of interacting and often competing players in today’s version of democracy has forced elected governments to become fixated on the results of opinion polls in order to try to divine “the will of the people” – or at least, the will of swinging voters. The global power of some constituents (e.g. big multinational companies, Church groups, unions, media organisations) and the huge cost of today’s elections have increased the sensitivity of national governments to the voices of big money and big power. It is the will of these people that appear to determine twenty-first century election results. Consequently, the growing power and complexity of monitory agents is creating the risk that democracy “might even disappear into the black holes of what in Italy and France are called ‘videocracy’ and ‘telepulism’”.

The increased power of well organised interest groups has been facilitated recently by the almost even split between the major political voting blocs of liberal and conservative in many Western democracies. Lobby groups and independent elected representatives can

now portray themselves as having the marginal power necessary to swing election results and can thereby exert disproportionate power on government policy and practice.

Is Today's Version of Democracy Right for the Times?

Despite being the dominant form in many Western countries today, monitory democracy with its maelstrom of self-interested voices claiming to represent the will of “the people” is not a form of democracy that is proving itself well adapted to dealing effectively with the complex problems facing the global commons today; e.g. climate change, the legal and ethical issues created by new genetic engineering technology, changing global power structures and economic imbalances, ethnic and religious tensions, the drug trade, flows of illegal immigrants and asylum seekers, etc. In attempting to keep all interested parties onside, policy development and implementation processes in Western democracies have become intolerably complex, slow and ineffective. For example, some media commentators have noted that as a result of the “Catherine wheel of policy development under the Rudd government by working groups, committees, reviews and consultants, the implementation of well-meaning policies went astray”.⁴ On the proliferation of “inquiries” as a policy making tool, John Black, a former Labor senator notes: “Inquiries, however well organised, are conducted in secret and then overwhelmed when made public by vested interests denied the chance to put their case in public and have it tested by media scrutiny”.⁵

In addition, while a high level of “intellectual horsepower” may be applied to formulating new government policies, this horsepower seems too often to be academic in nature, driven by econometric models and divorced from an accurate understanding of real world practicalities. Repeated implementation disasters are the inevitable result. Think home ceiling insulation programs, school hall building programs, mining resources rent tax, asylum seeker detention centres, water management programs, coal seam gas development planning, national broadband roll-out, etc. From my own experience in consulting to government agencies, policy analysis is the sexy, high-status end of the business and is too often jealously retained by senior managers who often are far removed from the reality that constrains action by the agencies that must implement their “brilliant” policy creations. Moreover, the quality of the work of the policy analyst is too often assessed (and rewarded) at the document-creation stage rather than at the results-on-the-ground stage.

Parties on each end of the political spectrum seem to be increasingly torn between standing up for their traditional, defining values and standing up for what will (according to the opinion polls) get them re-elected. As a result of the growing expediency and volatility of political decision making, both the major political parties in Australia and elsewhere appear to be losing the trust of their traditional power bases and can increasingly do little more than build short-term, transactional relationships with new supporters – supporters who are becoming increasingly skilled at playing the political game by its new rules. Thus, the dynamics of narcissistic, short-term, monitory democracy appear destined to become ever more deeply entrenched.

Any political party that actually tries to take a statesmanlike, high commitment approach to policy making will inevitably create some short term losers who will use today's communications technology to organise and amplify their voice (thereby making good news stories) and thus transform the short-term issue into one that might overturn a government. The wrangle over the Murray–Darling Basin Plan is a case in point. Entering into a bipartisan approach in the long term national interest is not seen by Opposition Leader Tony Abbott as the best way for him to get elected. So, parliament is stuck, nothing is decided and the Murray River continues to slowly die.

Underlying all these problems with monitory democracy is a more fundamental problem. Democratic nations do not seem to have a forum or a process for designing future versions of democracy that are suited to the likely future challenges that national and international governance process must be ready to meet. We seem to be stuck with governance processes that reflect yesterday's social, economic and military power structures, rather than tomorrow's realities and the new challenges that they will bring. To the extent that democracy is still evolving, future versions are likely to emerge in an unplanned way from the cauldron of today's crises, stresses and strains, and lucky breaks.

What Next for Democracy?

How might the next form of democracy evolve? Will it be a form that we can acknowledge as being suited to the global and national challenges facing us all today? Or, will we see currently "democratic" nations choosing to replace democracy with a different form of national governance process? The transformational tipping point is likely to be a significant crisis that either forces global or national leaders together in the interests of their common survival or which drives them apart as they respond to the protests of the powerful vested interests who were yesterday's political and economic winners and who can be expected to fight to maintain their traditional wealth and influence in a changing world.

The tipping point crisis will have to be large in scale, dire in nature, and present in time rather than simply threatening at some future date. The global Great Recession of 2007-2009, climate change threats to the planet's long term survival, and the hung parliaments in countries such as Australia and the UK as a result of the 2010 elections have not proved to be quite enough to stimulate the reinvention of democratic process in the countries affected. While powerful constituents continue to believe that they can achieve short-term wins by pushing democratically elected national leaders to promote or protect national or sectional self interest (think the emerging global currency wars) then this course of action is likely to be the strategy that many leaders will choose to pursue. It is likely to result in a continuing flow of campaign funds and favourable headlines – and, at least in the short term, it will win votes. However, if the self-interest strategy is pushed too far (as it was in response to the financial crisis of 1930) then forces are again likely to be unleashed that will lead to everyone losing.

Figure 1: Possible Pathways to 2025

Over the next few years, a number of critical global challenges will have significant influences on the particular path the world takes into the future of 2025. Key among these will be the currently unfolding global financial/economic/currency crisis. Other possible “gateway” challenges over the next 5 years that could influence the path that the world takes into the future of 2025 include climate change, a killer pandemic, piracy and terrorism, or the emergence of a rogue nuclear state. Several possible pathways to 2025 are shown below.



What form might a new governance process take and will we still call it “democracy”? There are several possible answers to this question and they depend on what future scenario you think will unfold as a result of the many social, technical, economic, environmental and political ingredients that are in the mix from which the long term future will be created. Figure 1 outlines four possible pathways to the global future of 2025 that depend, in part, on how governments and global governance institutions such as the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund manage the tensions that are still evolving as a result of the Global Financial Crisis of recent years.⁶ It is likely that the future that actually unfolds will involve elements of several of these scenarios. Indeed, we can see many of the features of these scenarios today because, as the science fiction writer William Gibson is quoted by Wikipedia as having said, “The future is already here, it’s just not very evenly distributed”.

Scenario 1: Global Markets

In this scenario, the challenge of returning the global economy to health forges greater cooperation and mutual understanding between nations. Leaders realise that their countries’ economic well-being depends on the wellbeing of global markets and global economic governance mechanisms. Bodies such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation and the International Monetary Fund are strengthened. New international forums such as the G20 become more effective and eventually restore a workable level of confidence in global markets.

Early in the scenario, as global economies continue to falter, voters around the world push governments to protect jobs and part of the strategy for doing this is to discourage migration and foreign investment. Large corporations push governments to protect their interests – even at the longer-term cost of the environment or the wider community (e.g. bail-outs to manufacturing and construction industries; and continuing subsidies to agricultural regions made uneconomic by climate change).

Markets deliver very positive outcomes for some but there is a growing divide between the haves and the have nots.

Governments, business and community groups attempt to manage the tensions and market failures at the global, national and local levels by building increasingly complex sets of rules, regulations, monitoring and compliance machinery.

In this scenario, governments have largely given up trying to proactively prevent systemic problems arising because they know that cooperation from others (including their own constituents) will only be token. So, issues are dealt with reactively as they arise – and people mostly then strive to look after their own interests.

There is growing distrust of governments that leads to resistance to raising taxes to pay for social benefits such as public health and education. The private sector moves to take a larger role in these areas as a result. This seems appropriate in a world where relationships are (often reluctantly) accepted as typically transactional and where markets rule.

Scenario 2: New Global Democracy

In this scenario, the GFC and climate change bring nations together in new governance forums in order to deal with problems that cannot be addressed by nations working independently. It becomes clear that pursuing self-interest in a globalised world only invites retaliation and continuing (expensive) conflict. Initially, peace is simply seen to be cheaper. However, trust gradually grows from there.

The success of cooperative efforts at the international level reinforces and is reinforced by new democratic governance mechanisms that are emerging at the corporate and community levels. Sustainability, triple bottom line, closing opportunity gaps, and social networking technology are ideas and forces that increasingly drive people towards more participative governance mechanisms. They also reduce social inequality.

We see many more reviews, consultative conferences, and community cabinet meetings in the search for “win-win” policies, solutions and decisions. This slows down decision making but speeds up implementation.

Regulatory negotiation is common as NGOs, industry groups and regulators work together to set standards and lower barriers to the movement of people and ideas.

Individuals become more actively involved in activities beyond their work. Work-life balance comes to mean more than work-leisure balance. People become engaged as active citizens, neighbours, and members of professional, developmental and social groups. This trend when combined with government’s preference for participative governance mechanisms leads to state authority diffusing downward to a host of local institutions, NGOs and community groups. It really is “government by the people, for the people”.

This scenario could lead to the re-emergence of new forms of assembly democracy with people and groups being actively involved in making the key decisions that shape the world they live in.

The ex Labor Senator, John Black, has highlighted the benefits of opening up the policy making process to the widest possible level of community participation. “When your committee hearings seep into the public consciousness and become material for plot lines in *Neighbours*, the executive may be resentful at the intrusion of democracy, but [it] does become compliant with your recommendations”.⁷

The Melbourne-based Grattan Institute has also emphasised the importance of wide community involvement in decision making relating to urban planning (not just “consultation” about decisions already taken by “experts”). When residents in cities such as Vancouver in Canada and Portland in the US were involved early in the planning process and were confronted with the trade-offs and likely consequences of alternative development options it “appears to have been critical to making tough decisions that were actually implemented”.⁸

Scenario 3: Governance Smorgasbord

In this scenario, energy exporting and “hard-asset rich” countries and those with low public and private sector debt are relative winners. Assets in energy rich and resource rich countries are increasingly in demand by China and others wishing to reduce their depreciating US dollar reserves and enhance resource security.

Countries seeking scarce strategic resources (such as oil, gas, uranium, rare earths, water, cheap workforces) are forced to reassess their stands on things like the environment and human rights and make deals with the countries that control the resources they need. Resource rich countries such as Russia and Iran become more assertive in defending their own national governance mechanisms and political cultures and are much less likely to see Western democracy and de-regulated markets as the best path to prosperity, economic growth, and social stability.

In this scenario, we see growing global diversity of national and state governance mechanisms with the leaders who control strategic resources being more confident that they can do things their way. After the hardships endured during the Global Financial Crisis, voters in many democratic countries and the growing middle class (and middle class aspirants) in most non-democratic developing countries come to prefer prosperity to traditional democratic rights and freedoms. Therefore, undemocratic leaders (e.g. in Africa) who are able to leverage rich natural resource endowments gradually gain popular support and are able to strengthen their grip on power.

Over time, the commercial imperative of having to deal with diverse cultures and forms of national governance leads to greater tolerance and mutual understanding in some nations while others that are in a position to do so persist in trying to get what they want by threatening military intervention or offering military protection against the (real or manufactured) threats posed by others.

Some nations invest heavily in more expensive local sources of supply of strategic resources and their substitutes. This slows their rates of economic growth but is accepted as an important part of the national security strategy. It has come to be seen in the same way as national spending on defence.

This is a future in which many governance forms co-exist. The forms that tend to dominate will be those that deliver growing levels of national prosperity regardless of whether this growth is the result of the unique properties of a particular governance mechanism or the good fortune of being a country that possesses resources that the rest of the world is prepared to pay high prices for.

Scenario 4: Fractured Governance

In this scenario, the global efforts to deal cooperatively with the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) end up being more rhetoric than reality (as in 1930). The GFC morphs into a protracted global depression.

Weakened international institutions, including increasingly under-funded bodies like the UN and WTO, provide little discipline to control the tendency of nationalistic governments to lean towards “beggar thy neighbour” policies. Across many realms where reciprocal action among nations is the key to success (as in the management of the GFC and climate change; and food, water and energy security) worldwide policy efforts flounder.

In the absence of strong multinational agencies of global governance, bilateral and regional alliances and trade agreements are entered into by governments and national bodies in areas of mutual national interest.

Increasingly desperate voters around the world push their governments to protect jobs at all costs and part of the strategy for doing this is to discourage migration and foreign investment and to impose trade barriers and “buy local” incentives.

Standards, laws and procedures that are relatively inflexible and widely divergent across jurisdictions translate into high compliance costs and are also significant non-tariff barriers to trade. Global mobility of people and money is seriously hampered.

Large corporations and other entrenched power groups push governments to protect their interests – even at significant cost to the environment or to the wider community (e.g. bail-outs to manufacturing and construction industries; continuing subsidies to agricultural regions made uneconomic by climate change; and the indefinite postponement of the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme and carbon pricing policies. Businesses with strong national identities (e.g. Qantas, BHP and the Big Four banks in Australia) fare well and are granted state protection through subsidies and the tax system.

Markets become increasingly distorted as politicians (and executives) try to favour their allies and constituencies. There is a growing divide between the winners and the losers. In reaction, populist protest often turns violent with strikes and demonstrations increasing as disaffected groups assert their agendas. Blaming foreigners, minorities or elite groups (e.g. for taking jobs and other local opportunities) is increasingly politically appealing.

In this future of fractured economies, “beggar thy neighbour” policies and economic decline, people develop strong attachments to their “tribe” whether this is their family, employing organisation, local community, or other support group. We may see some of the governance processes of assembly democracy at work at the local level where people identify with others. However, for people outside the tribe, there is likely to be considerable intolerance, stereotyping and suspicion. This is a world of “them and us” at all political and social levels.

Summary and Future-Creating Agendas

We have seen how democracy has been in flux for over 4500 years and how it appears to now be at another critical inflexion point in its evolutionary path. We have seen that democracy does not seem to have within it a mechanism for deliberately (and democratically) transforming itself when necessary to adapt to significant changes in the social, technological, economic, environmental and broader political environment. For 4500 years, its various evolutionary forms have tended to emerge in an unplanned way out of the crises, trends, revolutions, and accidents of the preceding period in history. In the absence of direct intervention by “the people”, we may reasonably expect that the future evolution of democracy is likely to continue in this systemic manner – shaped by the broader progress of world affairs.

To explore what might be in store for us, we considered four possible global scenarios for 2025 and explored some of their implications for the further evolution of international and national governance processes, including democracy. We found that it is by no means certain that democracy will be the dominant form of national governance in the future. As a Newsweek report on “the scary new rich” in the developing economies of China, Brazil, Russia, India and Turkey found: “Many of the aspiring elite seem willing to let the powers that be – whether authoritarian governments or elected ones – call the shots as long as they deliver the spoils of growth”.⁹

Future forms of governance will be shaped by the global/national/local future scenario that actually emerges. Through our actions as voters and consumers, neighbours and tourists, parents and carers, investors and employees, leaders and led we are all helping to bring the future into being. As we have seen in our scenario explorations, we are thereby helping to bring a particular future form of international and national governance into being. We can play our role in this process either consciously and deliberately or unconsciously and haphazardly but we cannot choose not to play a role in the future creation process.

Some possible actions that can be initiated by different elements of “the people” to stimulate a renewal of democracy for the world we will be living in are suggested below:

Actions for Governments to consider:

- Work with employers, the self-employed and community groups to define a charter of democratic rights and responsibilities that would set out what governments will be expected to do and not do; what organisations will be expected to do and not do; and what individuals will be expected to do and not do in creating a healthy, democratic society and nation. Different political parties would no doubt compete on where they felt the lines should be drawn between these various rights and responsibilities.
- Change the taxation system to give tax concessions to organisations and individuals that are actively contributing to creating a healthy, democratic society. Instead of simply allowing tax deductions for certain kinds of expenditures, the system could allow deductions for specified actions that were defined by the parliament as having positive social or environmental effects; e.g. participating in Neighbourhood Watch programs or in the local school’s Parents and Citizens Association; achieving reductions in energy

usage; volunteering to assist a local charity; caring for elderly parents; etc. These constructive individual and organisational actions help to prevent problems from arising and thereby obviate the need for governments to levy taxes and extend the bureaucracy to fix them.

- Change industrial laws to give incentives for employers to re-design jobs and workplace cultures to allow people time to more actively participate in community-building activities and in fulfilling their responsibilities as citizens in a democratic society.

Actions for Organisations to consider:

- Ensure that criteria for promotion to leadership positions within the organisation emphasise candidates' actual or potential capacity to employ a democratic/participative leadership style.
- Re-design jobs and workplace cultures to allow people time to more actively participate in community-building activities and in fulfilling their responsibilities as citizens in a democratic society.
- Create forums and implement processes for involving all stakeholders in making significant decisions affecting the future of the organisation.

Actions for Individuals to consider:

- Learn more about what makes for a successful democracy and the roles that individuals must play in order for democracies to be sustainable.
- Base your decisions about who to work for, or who to buy from, or who to invest in, or who to vote for, or to which school to send your children on the extent to which the organisation/party/group/individual concerned acts in ways that demonstrate and foster democratic values and processes.
- Encourage the governments and organisations you interact with to implement the actions listed above.

We should all regularly ask ourselves what future is likely to be created by the way we are living today and what we can do to increase the chances that our preferred future will actually unfold. Otherwise, we may find ourselves (and our children) living in a future that may be more or less prosperous than the present but which is governed by very different processes to those that we now label "democracy".

Endnotes

1. The quotes on the first two pages are from John Keane's book, "The Life and Death of Democracy". Simon and Schuster, London, 2009
2. Nikolai Hubble, "Who Trusts a Politician?". The Daily Reckoning Week in Review, October 18th to 22nd, 2010. See <http://www.dailyreckoning.com.au/who-trusts-a-politician/2010/10/23/>
3. Twenge, J. M., Konrath, S., Foster, J. D., Campbell, W. K., and Bushman, B. J. "Egos inflating over time: A cross-temporal meta-analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory". Journal of Personality, 2008, Vol. 76, pp. 875-902.
4. Marcus Priest. "Stand and deliver...or the policy gets it". Australian Financial Review, 20 October, 2010, p. 65
5. John Black. "New guard doesn't know how to lead". Australian Financial Review, 20 October, 2010, p. 67
6. The future pathways and scenarios discussed here are based on consulting work conducted by Dr Peter Saul for Skills Australia in 2009. See <http://www.petersaul.com.au/Australia-2025-Scenarios.pdf> This work was, in turn, based on scenarios developed by Shell International Limited and published as "Shell Global Scenarios to 2025". Shell Global Business Environment, London (2005)
7. See John Black (2010) above.
8. Lisa Carapiet. "Planners need residents' views". Australian Financial Review, 19 October, 2010, p. 48
9. Rana Foroohar and Mac Margolis. "The Scary New Rich", Newsweek, 15 March, 2010, pp. 20-23
10. See, for example, "The Great Transition Initiative", <http://www.gtinitiative.org/>