
What is new Democracy?

The Hon. Dr. Geoff Gallop

Lecture at the Hawke Centre

Adelaide

20 November 2013

My aim tonight is to advocate for political reform but not before analysing why I believe it to be important. I want to encourage you all to learn about - and encourage your politicians to learn about - a whole range of democratic initiatives that go beyond our normal consultations, that can be more representative of 'the people' and which work harder at ensuring our focus is on deliberating for the public interest.

I want you to start to think about the concepts of empowerment, random selection, and deliberation. In doing this I want you to reflect with me on the issue of how we imagine our democracy and how we actually operate it.

What is going on in politics and how is it affecting governments today? Are there things we can do to make our system work better?

I'm particularly interested in the 552 governments that operate throughout Australia -the Commonwealth, the States and Territories and our Local Authorities.

None of these governments can operate without constraint but they do have degrees of executive power and the responsibility to give leadership to their communities.

WHAT AND HOW

Let me begin, then, by asking two questions about our governments:

- What do "we" -that is to say the community - expect of them?
- How do "we" expect them to operate?

I use the "we" here in the full and democratic sense of the word as our common rather than our individual interests.

I ask these questions in the context of a belief that that we live in a world of structural change and decidedly complex problems. The balance of world power is shifting, the people are restless for power but not always in ways compatible with liberalism, the climate is changing, our population is ageing and inequality is feeding dissent in ways many our rulers seem not to understand.

We need big decisions and we need sophisticated decisions from our 552 governments. We want them to be doing things, big and small, that add to the well-being of our community. We want action and we want results.

However, in our type of society we also want governments to work in a particular way - through due process and without corruption. We want governments that serve the public interest in what they do and how they do it.

That means respect for the rights of minorities as well as the needs of the majority, concern for the future as well as the present, commitment to the environment as well as the economy and support for community values as well as economic aggregates.

It is our belief that our system is capable of this complex task because it has three features:

- 1) It provides room for leadership,
- 2) it provides checks and balances and
- 3) it encourages the development of knowledge through scientific endeavour.

The political parties provide our leaders, our legislatures create our system of checks and balances and our academics and researchers produce our knowledge.

It's that great alliance forged in the Enlightenment -

LEADERSHIP + ACCOUNTABILITY + KNOWLEDGE = SOCIAL PROGRESS.

POLITICS TODAY

Progress is achievable today and we see examples of it at all levels of government. However, the Enlightenment alliance for progress is not in as healthy a state as it ought to be and that poses a challenge for all of us who believe big and sophisticated decisions are needed.

On the one side we all too often see a political class that is either fearful or resentful of the people and always looking for ways to neuter their influence or avoid their embrace; or one caught up in an agenda laid down by focus groups and opinion polls, no matter what the issue. It's a case of cynical manipulation or unashamed populism.

On the other side we all too often see the people cynical, disengaged and resigned to their fate as "the ruled" or agitated, angry and active about almost everything governments do or suggest.

It's not a pretty picture and is made worse by the continual assaults on science-based knowledge about nature and society by fundamentalism, ideology and the prejudice. It is one thing to have strong beliefs but quite another to apply them in a world of competing beliefs and real and less than perfect human beings. We need serious inquiry to guide us rather than just slogans delivered from on high.

In such an environment groups at all levels tend to hold their ground, disinterested in or hostile towards give and take, fearing that it will open up the floodgates to their demise.

How often do we see the following mix of elements?

- Governments avoiding hard questions about the future and always going with the flow of opinion.
- Interest groups fighting with tooth and nail to defend their patch or promote change in their own but not the public interest.
- Local communities saying "not-in-my-backyard" whatever the issue and whatever the facts.

-
- Intellectuals more interested in "faith" and "ideology" than they are in human welfare and evidence about how to promote it.

NEW DEMOCRACY AS A WAY FORWARD

That brings me to new democracy and the contribution it can make to good government. Its central theme is simple -the re-engagement of people in the political process by moving beyond elections, information provision and consultation to new and deeper forms of democracy.

It might be better consultation, using modern technology to elicit feedback for example. It might be the delegation of power to new representative institutions.

It might be the use of deliberation to ensure the evidence of science is properly considered. It might be the use of random selection as a principle.

The new Democracy Foundation exists to facilitate these ideas and we have been involved with the following projects:

- The Australian Citizen's Parliament
- The City of Canada Bay's participatory budget.
- The NSW Parliament Public Accounts Committee Citizens' Juries on energy policy
- Premier Jay Weatherill's Citizens' Jury on alcohol and night life
- Premier Barry O'Farrell and Lord Mayor Clover Moore's Citizens Jury on a similar topic to premier Weatherill's- to be held soon.

This isn't, however, just an issue I have "discovered" since leaving Parliament in 2006. The Gallop Labor Government was very active in this territory particularly in the infrastructure and planning portfolio of Allana MacTiernan (now Member for Perth). The big one was our Dialogue with the City involving 1,100 participants which drafted up a planning framework for Perth on the understanding that the Government would implement what they recommended. Of the 1,100 participants - one third was randomly selected, one third invited stakeholders and one third self-nominated to attend following advertisements in newspapers, radio and internet.

However, we did more than just Dialogue with the City, we initiated six Consensus Forums, three Citizens Juries, a Deliberative Survey, three Multi-Criteria Analysis Conferences, two enquiry by Design Dialogues and a range of more traditional forms of consultation, for example the Drug Summit and the Water Summit. All of this added value to government and helped solve a range of problems that might have otherwise been put in the too hard basket.

When you look at what is happening internationally as well as locally in this space a number of reasons can be identified for utilising such techniques.

WHEN DOES IT HELP?

It might be a small, but seemingly intractable issue in a particular locality. Normal politics should solve it but it doesn't and can't.

It might be a challenge from new technology whose consequences aren't fully known and governments need a sense of direction that satisfies community expectations about risk and its management.

It might be a major society-wide issue like the Constitution or electoral system. Given that many of these issues go to referendum anyway a comprehensive analysis of the problem that satisfies our spirit of democracy will be needed if the voting public are to trust the process and not be fearful of any recommendation put to them for decision. Voters are a contrary lot and can never be taken for granted.

It might be a wicked problem attached to which are powerful interests or involved in which are complex circumstances. Think of issues like the balance between taxation and expenditure, the congestion in our cities, alcohol and public order....The list goes on.

The evidence on all of this is clear - give people responsibility and fully inform them of the options and they will respond rationally and not just in their self-interest or what they might recognise as their normal views. Add random selection to the mix and proper deliberation is enhanced rather than diminished.

If politics generally is too adversarial, party conflicts too entrenched, interest groups too unflinching and voters too distrustful someone has to break the cycle. Encouraging serious treatment of the issue by an elected parliament might always be the first option, but we'd have to say, sadly perhaps, that it doesn't always have the same level of legitimacy as say a citizen's jury or a participatory budget.

If political leaders are serious about change they would recognise the potential of such techniques to do two things - firstly provide a democratic means for neutralising the real power vested interests have in our society and secondly, to help combat distrust in governments and all that they do. Indeed it gives power to both the people and to governments frustrated at the blockages in the current system. It also happens to be the case that the judicial application of new democracy principles is not just good policy but also good politics and not one without the other.

CONCLUSION

What's being proposed here is the addition of a new element to our system of representative democracy. Our system of leadership, checks and balance and knowledge acquisition is the same but we are adding energy to its operation; the sort of energy that comes when ordinary people are trusted rather than seen as liabilities or enemies and when we focus on the problem at hand rather than our individual or party political interests. It is what we might call public interest creativity.

It isn't an approach that we would adopt for all issues at all times but it ought to be in the toolkits of all our governments. I say this not just as a matter of faith but because there is stacks of evidence proving its effectiveness. Put simply it works.

So endeth my sermon for the day.