

Britain has fallen out of love with conventional politics. Could Swiss-style direct democracy end the current crisis of political legitimacy?

by DOUGLAS SMITH



Politicians tell us that they are concerned by the declining turnout in elections. They bemoan the failure of contemporary politics to engage the public. They commission reports to find an explanation for this alarming trend. They spend large sums of our own money to persuade us of the importance of voting. But they studiously, even perversely, fail to face up to the crushingly obvious truth: people won't vote because it's an outdated, ineffective and crude way of deciding how our affairs are run.

In Britain we've had a universal franchise for many decades. When it was first granted, a large majority of the population was uneducated. Many people thought that it was better to leave the complicated matter of running the country to an elite of wise men. After all, if they made a mess of things they could be ejected from office after five years.

This was a questionable proposition even in the early 20th Century. Yet that is still how we organise ourselves. Every few years we are expected to give a leasehold on power to a cabal of professional politicians. If we don't like them we can wait until the next election and bring in another bunch.

Half the UK population now goes into further education. Thanks to the rapid development of communications technology we have a highly informed citizenry. All of us are used to making decisions of importance in our own lives on a day-by-day basis. Why on earth do we persist with this self-denying system that prevents us from controlling society ourselves?

Some commentators claim that we don't really care about politics in this country. So why did a million people march in central London last February against the looming war in Iraq? Half a million walked on the issue of hunting. People sign petitions on issues ranging from local planning to the euro all the time. Are these individuals content with the way they are governed and with the quality of decision making in this country?

When people feel disempowered they can go in one of two directions: they can become energised, sometimes even resorting to violence; or they can become cynical and apathetic. Currently, it is the latter course that is predominant in the UK, but for how much longer? There is no obstacle preventing us from transforming the way we decide public policy in this country, apart from the ingrained resistance of those who have had monopoly control over power for so long - the politicians

In order to break that monopoly we need, as a first step, to adopt the Swiss system. In Switzerland there is a high degree of decentralisation. The country is divided into a series of 26 cantons - historic regions with distinct identities and a high degree of autonomy from the federal government. The one-size-fits-all centralisation of the English or French model is inconceivable to the Swiss. Switzerland's cantons have the freedom to innovate and to learn from each others' successes and mistakes.

The other great strength of Swiss democracy is that citizens have the right to call a referendum on any subject they want, providing they can gather enough signatures. For example, any new law brought before the Federal Assembly (the Swiss parliament) can be challenged by the voters before it is enacted. If enough people don't like a measure they can call a referendum and throw the law out.



But the democratic rights of Swiss citizens don't end there. If 100,000 signatures are collected within an 18-month period then a proposal can be proactively put on the ballot paper and voted on by the general public. If it is passed, then it becomes law. This is direct democracy in action. Thus, in 1990 there was a referendum on a grassroots proposal for a 10-year moratorium on the construction of nuclear power plants in Switzerland. Despite the pro-nuclear stance of business and the establishment, the public voted by a 55 per cent majority in favour of the measure. This stunning example of people power could not have happened in the UK because the government wouldn't dream of allowing an 'ignorant' public to interfere with its plans.

Switzerland's population is approximately 7,500,000, so it takes 1.3 per cent of the population to initiate a referendum there. If the UK adopted the same method then we'd need roughly 900,000 signatures. That would radically transform our politics. Not only would we be able to stop many bad things from happening; we'd also be able to kick-start positive changes. The whole process of calling a referendum would ensure more widespread and much better informed debate.

A recent instance of this actually happening in the UK was the vote on whether Stoke-on-Trent (not an area noted for enthusiastic democratic participation) should have a directly elected mayor. As a result of the debate on the principle and the election itself the city ended up with a most unexpected result: a gay advice centre worker who ran as an independent was elected; he has become a notably successful mayor. Without the initial referendum none of this would have been possible.



In the US many states have a system of so-called 'propositions', whereby citizens can put measures they support onto the ballot for the next set of elections. Those who suspect that reactionary populists and big business dominate such votes should look at the record. There is no ideological colour to successful initiatives: everything depends on local circumstances and effective campaigning.

The fear of the vulgar mob - best expressed in this country by the cultural disdain of the liberal middle classes for readers of The Sun - is the most effective weapon in the armoury of the political elite. 'My God,' they incant. 'Imagine what they would vote for if we gave them the chance.' Dividing the general public into mutually suspicious blocs is such an obvious trick that it's amazing that anyone falls for it, but there are still plenty of broadsheet columnists who like nothing better than to list their readers' most hated measures and then assure them that they would be enacted the day after Britain adopted direct democracy.

Such scaremongering becomes even more absurd when we take the concept down to the local level. At the moment councils make all kinds of decisions, many of them contrary to the wishes of the people they represent. If Sainsbury's or Tesco is granted planning permission to build a large out-of-town hypermarket because key councillors have had their egos (or wallets) plumped up, and if John Prescott (the minister with responsibility for planning) happens to agree (he usually does), then there is absolutely nothing that the local citizens can do about it. Why not allow those who live, work and shop in the areas affected by such schemes to have the final say? The supermarket boss wouldn't like the idea, but the rest of us would.

There's a further measure that could truly turn the tables on the politicians. It's called a recall vote. Pioneered in California, it allows voters to petition for the removal of a failing and discredited politician. If they get the required number of signatures (900,000 out of 15 million registered voters in California) then the people can have a ballot and sack the person they chose in the first place. Famously, Arnold Schwarzenegger became governor of California last year after voters recalled the incumbent, Gray Davis, who was widely blamed for incompetent handling of the state's energy crisis. What a fabulous antidote to governmental arrogance that would be if it were applied in Britain.

These proposals are reasonable. They provide a way of dramatically increasing participation in politics. Furthermore, they offer a safety valve - not just for those who get their way, but also for those on the losing side of a referendum. To be told by the majority of your fellow citizens that they honestly disagree with you is a lot less galling than to be ignored, ridiculed and marginalised by tinpot politicians with the same level of education as the rest of us and only a fraction of our common sense.

There's a very simple way to decide whether direct democracy is a good idea. Go outside. Walk around. Look at people going about their business. Do they look evil to you? Do they excite your fear and loathing? Of course not. They are ordinary and decent, just like you. Then come back in and switch on your TV. Watch the professional politicians performing in Parliament. Which lot do you trust more?

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