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Direct and representative democracy

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Much concern has been expressed about declining rates of participation in elections in Britain, and the question of whether democracy should be direct or representative has been raised.

The case against representation

It has been argued that representatives simply do as they please and disregard the interests and views of those who voted for them. In a famous passage in *The Social Contract*, Rousseau argues that to be represented is to give up — to alienate — powers that individuals alone can rightfully exercise.

Burke turned Rousseau's views inside out when he argued that the representative must decide issues as he (Burke took it for granted that representatives must be men) sees fit. The conscience of the MP is far more important than the views of the elector. This view is still influential today and leads to the argument that the House of Commons is an 'elective dictatorship'. There is a well-known anarchist dictum: 'If voting changed anything, they would have abolished it long ago.' The negative view of voting arises because people see politicians as elitist and out of touch.

The role of representation

It seems to me that, while the elitist view of representation is untenable, the notion of representation as 'alienation' and 'betrayal' is equally one-sided. There are two ways of thinking of individuals: either they exist in isolation from one another (the atomistic view — linked to classical liberalism) or they are always related, so that the identity of each individual can only be asserted in relation to another. If we adopt the latter view — which fits the facts of social life — we are always being represented. As social beings, others do things which we cannot do for ourselves and, in a broad sense, they are acting as our representatives.

Classical liberalism is correct to assert that the individual is 're-presented' by those who act on their behalf but wrong to ignore the question of difference.

Representatives are always different from us, and in a democracy we need to be able to control them. It is here that the question of direct democracy is important, for direct democracy reminds us that we have representatives to better govern our own lives. Single-issue groups, like Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, CND or the Victorian Society (which campaigns for conserving old buildings), have committees and representatives — and anyone who goes to a meeting where there is no chair or secretary soon becomes aware how arbitrary and tyrannical such meetings can be.

Direct democracy involves the citizen in policy-making itself, so that people can vote not simply on whom they want to represent them, but, say, for referendums which are put to them. The communications revolution has facilitated direct involvement. There is no doubt that, individuals can and should be directly involved in major issues of the day. The right to demonstrate is being more widely exercised and direct interventions like these make representatives aware of grass-roots feeling. People do not have the time, energy or expertise to replace representatives, so direct democracy should not be counterposed to representative democracy: it is rather a question of how we are able to control representatives, not whether we have them (Hoffman 1995).

How representative should representatives be?

Representatives can only act on behalf of those they represent if they understand their problems and way of life. What are we to make of the notion of 'mirror' representation? This suggests that exact percentages of groups within the population at large need to be 'reflected' in the composition of representatives. If the population of a particular city (like Leicester) contains, say, 40% of black people, a local council is only representative if 40% of the representatives are black. It is not difficult to see the problem with this notion. Black people in Leicester are divided ethnically, regionally, along class and gender lines etc. and



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it would be wrong, therefore, to assume that one black person is the same as another. Moreover, it does not follow that black representatives will necessarily represent the interests of black constituents, any more than we can assume that women representatives will represent the interests of women.

The 'mirror' theory expresses the classical liberal idea that there should be no difference between ourselves and those who represent us. But a moment's thought demonstrates why this position can't be sustained. Everyone is different, and, indeed, the reason why some people put themselves forward for election and others don't is that they have resources and interests which set them apart. To pretend otherwise is simply unrealistic.

On the other hand, this difference must not become a justification for elitism. Kymlicka (1995) has rightly argued that accountability is 'the other side' of representation, and we do want to ensure that the local councillor or MP, chair and secretary of a single-issue organisation, are aware of what we feel and take our views into account. Representation, I would say, involves empathy. Representatives should be able to put themselves in the position of those they represent. It is impossible to *be* another person, but it is possible to imagine what it is like to be another — because we are all the same. Sameness and difference reinforce each other: we should not have to make a choice between them.

Securing democratic representation

A democratic view of representation can only take place if representatives 'represent' individuals in a way which makes them sensitive to the particular identities and problems of those they represent. We need to feel comfortable with our representatives, that they 'speak our language', understand our problems and are sensible people. This is only possible if representatives are, broadly speaking, 'representative', i.e. they include significant numbers of people who are the same colour, gender, sexual orientation etc. as the population at large.

More people would vote and take part in politics generally, I think, if they felt that representatives were amenable to their direct action. This means that we do not simply put a cross on a piece of paper, but keep in touch with our representatives, so that they know what we are feeling.

References and further reading

- Hoffman, J. (1995) *Beyond the State*, Polity.
- Kymlicka, W. (1995) *Multi-cultural Citizenship*, Clarendon.
- Rousseau, J. J. (1968 edn) *The Social Contract*, Penguin.

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