

Democracy, ethics and the public good: The 2014 Geering Seminar

Presentation notes

'Emerging visions, emerging realities: Democratic deficit, deliberative democracy'
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Hear so much about

- Declining membership of political parties
- Declining interest in voting (and low voter turn-outs)
- Declining trust and legitimacy of politicians and political processes

And yet

- Widespread engagement in civil associations of various kinds (particularly social movements; e.g. feminism, environmentalism, sustainability, Occupy)
- Explosion of critical analysis and commentary on the internet (outside of mainstream media)
- Better educated, more articulate citizenry, more willing and able to express their views
- Significant shift towards participation, partnership and co-production in the policy process
 - Demanded by clients, stakeholders, and often occurring in collaboration with some government officials – but under the radar

??Less democracy but also more democracy? Simultaneously?

Will use the terms 'democratic deficit' and 'deliberative democracy' to interpret

My comments not new or particularly insightful

- Frequently expressed (e.g. 'Democratic Audit UK') but worth repeating and adding to the growing clamour of voices
- Not 'whole society' but emergent, fragile trend

Essence of argument

- Mainstream political institutions are not adapting (maybe cannot) to 21st century (their assumptions have been superseded)
- Some citizens (and some political actors) are creating new ways of doing aspects of democratic politics ('deliberation')
- Important to not try and fix the old; but recognise the new and build on it

'Democratic deficit' and 'deliberative democracy' two terms used increasing currency

- Democratic deficit

- The gap between citizen expectations and government performance/policy outcomes (superficial?)
- Gap between what citizens expect of their system of democratic government, how they expect it to work (including their influence on that system) and their actual experience as citizens, individually and collectively

Deliberative democracy

- Politics not as competition between major, dichotomised interests (fixed power blocs, primarily capital and labour)
- But an ongoing process of debate, dialogue and consensus formation amongst diverse groups with disparate needs and values
- Governing processes that enable widespread participation and dialogue
- Plus multiple and fluid forms (including national/local, centre/periphery relationships)

Democratic deficit is a product of

- Rising expectations that new ways are needed for new realities; and
- Institutions that haven't adapted to new circumstances
- Explains loss of legitimacy, disaffection and alienation – but also emergence of new types of active agents amongst citizens with different dreams

Deliberative democracy is a label for a new politics that is based on

- the desire for public discussion and practical action amongst diverse interests to both express and make sense of emerging realisations and practical adaptations

My argument

- High levels of absence, disaffection, scepticism, cynicism point to alienation of citizens from mainstream institutions of government
 - Exacerbated by a democratic deficit
- Active agents (public and civic entrepreneurs, fellow travellers, guardian angels) are driven to create emergent practical arrangements for expressing and realising collective preferences (especially at the local level, often in collaboration with government officials)
 - and that the new information technologies are an important vehicle
 - (not replacing politics but enabling new forms of governing)
- Established institutions and role incumbents haven't yet figured it out or are denying (not adapting, or only partially adapting - grudgingly)
 - (partly because established elites (economic classes?) are re-asserting their influence, their ways of working, including interest mediation, centralisation and hierarchy)

The task ahead?

- Support 'deliberation' (talk up these ideas)
- And those wonderful people working under the radar ('making it happen', 'learning as they go')