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Democratic strategies for reducing inequality

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The remarks that follow are the text of my response to the following request: “The Commission would be grateful if you could address the issue of democratic processes/mechanisms as tools to deepen equality particularly among young people and those living in socially disadvantaged areas in a 20 minute presentation.” I was honoured to be invited to talk with the Commission about this topic. At the same time I was very conscious of the limits of my knowledge and understanding of the field and I would be horrified to be thought of as an ‘expert’ who could provide the answers to the Commission’s questions. But then isn’t this part of the point of democracy? None of us are truly experts in the major policy questions that confront our society, and one of the central arguments for democracy is that it is only by putting together our diverse understandings, experiences and perspectives that we can hope to construct adequate answers to the problems of the day.

In what I say below I draw very heavily on the book I wrote with Kathleen Lynch, Sara Cantillon and Judy Walsh called *Equality: From Theory to Action*, especially chapters 2 and 6 (Baker et al. 2004). Those chapters contain contains additional discussion and references for anyone who would like to pursue these questions in greater depth.

If I had more space I would fill in the background to what I have to say by discussing the relation of democracy to equality. All I will say by way of preliminaries is that although I was asked to address inequalities to do with socially disadvantaged areas and young people, I think there are several other important inequalities that can be addressed in similar terms and I don’t propose to limit myself to the two that were specified.

In all of these cases, the *fundamental* problem is that the groups in question are marginalized and disadvantaged in Irish society, that these inequalities generate inequalities in political participation, and that those political inequalities in turn reinforce wider social inequalities. We should not labour under the illusion that we can somehow bring about substantial equality in democratic participation without

reducing inequalities throughout society: there is no 'internal settlement' in the political system, any more than in the educational or any other system. All of this creates a serious 'chicken-and-egg' problem to which I return at the end of this paper.

Abstracting from these issues for a moment, the specific question I have been asked to address is what can be done in the design of the political system itself to promote greater equality, which I take to be, first, a question about increasing the participation of disadvantaged groups and, secondly, about countering the oppressive tendencies of majority rule. Here are six headings that are worth exploring.

1. Supporting the self-organisation of marginalized groups

If there is one activity that is worth prioritizing above all the rest, in my view it would be supporting the self-organization of marginalized groups. I emphasize the idea of 'self-organization': if we want real change for Travellers, disabled people, working class people, women, gays and lesbians, immigrants, young people, etc., it is not enough to rely on members of other groups, speaking on their behalf. They need to be resourced to participate themselves, through their own organizations.

There are at least two aspects of the kind of support that is necessary here. First of all, there is straightforward material support. To organize effectively for change, people need meeting rooms, offices, computers, telephones, photocopiers, libraries, travel expenses, office staff, paid organizers and lobbyists. Well-resourced groups like IBEC can pay for all this out of their membership fees, but where is this material support to come from for poorly-resourced groups? In a small number of cases, the collective support of large numbers of individuals can succeed in supporting self-organization. The best example of this is the trade union movement. But for most organizations, it is hard even to survive, much less to thrive, on funding from one's own members.

There is no need to labour the point that there are very limited sources of support from funding institutions in Ireland, which in any case are vulnerable to changes in funders' priorities. So the main prospect for serious, long-term, core funding for the self-organization of marginalized groups is state funding. This funding should be secure, core funding with very few strings attached. It is appropriate enough for it to be conditional on proper auditing of accounts and on maintaining certain basic standards

of democratic procedure in relation to membership, election to office and decision-making mechanisms. But it has to be protected against being withdrawn for essentially political reasons, as occurred with the Citizen Traveller campaign and the Community Workers' Co-op. The whole point of this kind of funding is to enable marginal groups to develop their own perspectives and political strategies, however critical they might be of the state.

The second kind of support is training and capacity-building. People do not develop the competence to participate in democratic organizations by instinct: they need to learn how to do it through practice, reflection on that practice, and acquiring relevant knowledge. One part of this training is education for citizenship in the formal educational system. Another, to which I return below, is the experience of democratic participation in a wide variety of settings. But a third must be explicit training and capacity-building programmes for members of organizations themselves. A good example of this in the US is Midwest Academy, which has been training activists for 30 years (see Bobo, Kendall, and Max 2001). Here in Ireland, I think an excellent resource is the Combat Poverty Agency publication *Working for Change: A Guide to Influencing Policy in Ireland* (Harvey 1998). In the examples of participatory governance in India and Brazil that I will mention in a minute, part of the process has been intensive training of the participants. More generally, any of the other initiatives I am about to mention need to be supplemented by appropriate training.

Is it legitimate for a liberal democratic state to finance the explicitly political activities of marginalized groups in these ways? I would argue that it is, because the object of the exercise is to level the playing field in the political sphere between these groups and their privileged counterparts. The relevant political principle is simply the aim of giving every citizen an equal opportunity to influence collective decisions. It is not about the state favouring one set of political objectives over others, but about helping all its citizens to pursue their own political objectives with roughly similar effectiveness.

2. Strengthened local participatory structures

A second type of strategy for promoting democratic equality is to develop strengthened local structures for participating in decision-making. People living in socially disadvantaged areas face a range of policy problems, some of which are similar to those in advantaged areas and some of which are distinctive in quality or scale. In addition, they are much less well resourced than people in advantaged areas for dealing directly with the formal political system through lobbying, direct contact with public representatives, the use of informal social networks and so on. Developing means by which they can become more directly involved in policy-making and prioritizing is therefore another way of helping to level the playing field.

One of the most widely cited examples of local democratic empowerment is the Participatory Budgeting process developed in Porto Alegre in Brazil and currently being extended to more than 100 other Brazilian cities with Workers' Party governments. In this case, which I know of only through published accounts (Abers 1998; Baiocchi 2003; De Sousa Santos 1998), there is a highly developed system through which local communities participate in decision-making relating to the allocation of the municipal budget for services including road improvements, water, drainage and other public services. The process is thoroughly described in a number of sources so I will only mention a few of its prominent features. It takes place in parallel with the formal political system: the adoption of the Participatory Budget, which covers only that part of the municipal budget directly concerned with certain public services, is formally within the power of the city council, but this does not seem to lead to serious conflict. The process is supported by skilled facilitators and by intensive training for participants so that ordinary citizens are empowered to understand, challenge and reconstruct budgetary proposals. Among the most promising aspects of the process is the fact that, in contrast to most other contexts, there is very little evidence of unequal participation by class or gender. The Participatory Budget shows that such democratic involvement is perfectly feasible even in a relatively poor country.

Another very interesting example I have read about is the Campaign for Decentralized Planning in the Indian state of Kerala (Thomas Isaac and Heller 2003). In this case, as well, the process involves providing structures through which ordinary citizens can have a serious influence on planning the delivery and priorities of local services. As in

Porto Alegre, it involves the use of skilled facilitators and an intensive training programme for participants. Another similarity is that participation by women and members of disadvantaged groups (in this case, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) has been disproportionately high.

Although I have read up some of the written reports on these cases, I cannot claim to have detailed knowledge of them or to be in a position to compare them to some of the attempts to engage local communities here in Ireland in processes of local planning. I think that would be an interesting area for the Commission to look into.

3. Separate representation for marginalized groups

A third strategy for using democracy to support equality is to construct and develop ways for directly representing the interests and perspectives of marginalized groups.

There has been some attention to this strategy at national and local electoral level in some countries. The clearest example I have come across is the system in New Zealand / Aotearoa for the representation of Maoris through a separate electoral roll that Maoris can opt onto and that has its own constituency boundaries (Electoral Commission [New Zealand] 2003). The electors on this roll currently elect seven of the 120 members of the New Zealand Parliament. It is not clear to me that there are any feasible applications of this model to Ireland at the level of electoral politics although it could be interesting to hear whether the Travelling community would consider it a positive proposal to have their own TD elected from a national roll of Travellers (assuming that such a roll would have approximately 1/166th of the country's adult population).

Where the idea of separate representation really comes into its own in an Irish context is in connection to partnership bodies at both local and national level. We already have something like this in national partnerships through the role of the Community and Voluntary Sector in the NESF, the NESC and national partnership agreements. What is different there, and deserves more attention, is the difference between the genuine representation of marginalized groups through representatives of their own choosing and the more attenuated sense in which these groups are represented by

organizations that aim to act on their behalf but have no lines of accountability to the groups themselves. I know that there is work being done at the level of local partnership, in particular, to try to ensure that the representatives of local communities, of disabled people, of Travellers, of gays and lesbians, of older people, and so on, are chosen by and accountable to organizations composed of members of these groups rather than simply being people chosen from the top as likely advocates of their views. But I cannot speak with any authority on those initiatives.

As with the issue of resources, it cannot be right for organizations to be included or excluded in partnership processes on the basis of political decisions about their policy positions. So long as they are prepared to engage in the process, they should have a right to a seat at the table, and with that right comes the right to accept or reject proposed agreements. It seems extraordinary to me that the groups that rejected *Sustaining Progress* have been excluded from partnership at all levels of national consultation. That kind of reaction simply reinforces their vulnerable status.

There is resistance in some quarters to the idea that forms of governance based on the direct representation of marginalized groups is truly democratic, based on the assumption that true democracy only occurs through elections in which everyone participates. I think this is a mistaken criticism. The point of ensuring that marginalized groups have their own representatives is, as before, to try to level the playing field between these groups and other, more advantaged groups, not to give them more than their share of influence. In a political system where a Traveller is *never* elected; where a disabled person is only elected once in a blue moon, and virtually never on account of an agenda specifically dealing with disability issues; where if a gay man or lesbian is elected, the first issue is whether or not even to disclose the fact and the next is usually to reassure voters that one's sexual orientation has nothing whatever to do with one's policies – in such a system, the idea of ensuring that the voices of these groups are actually heard is a way of enhancing political equality, not of subverting democracy.

4. Quotas for members of marginalized groups

A more familiar mechanism for promoting equality is the use of quotas. Here again we can distinguish between quotas within formal electoral systems and quotas in other structures of governance.

Within electoral systems, there is quite a lot of international experience now with gender quotas (Rule and Zimmerman 1994), which typically operate through the nominating procedures of political parties and sometimes through a direct requirement that some minimum number of women has to be elected to a particular body (my impression is that the number is usually 1). Such a system is much easier to operate in proportional representation systems using party lists than in first-past-the-post systems or in the PRSTV system we use in Ireland but it is not impossible. What is harder is to extend it to marginalized groups other than women because the groups are much more indeterminate and fluid (Phillips 1995).

But here again there are other structures of governance where the use of quotas is more feasible. Many quasi-governmental organizations have appointed boards, and there are no serious problems in stipulating that these organizations should be gender-balanced or in stipulating that they should contain specified numbers of members of other marginalized groups. The fact that these bodies are not elected does not mean that they are outside the bounds of the idea of democracy, since they still play an important role in democratic government. If the members of these bodies are also nominated by appropriate organizations of marginalized groups, there is a convergence of the ideas of separate representation and quotas.

The use of quotas has its critics, and some of the problems they've raised are worthy of attention. The main one is that in the absence of any form of accountability to the group, it is hard to ensure that the group member acts in any plausibly representative capacity. Just because a representative is a woman, or gay, or disabled, does not mean that she or he has a perspective that is representative of even a significant proportion of women or gays or disabled people. But even in the absence of mechanisms of accountability, it is often possible to see over time whether the people filling quotas are acting in line with or contrary to the perspectives they are chosen to reflect, particularly if there are well-resourced and articulate organizations of the groups in question.

What in my view is *not* a serious objection to quotas is the claim that they subvert democracy by restricting the choices of voters. They surely *do* restrict the choices of voters but they do so precisely because the choices of voters lead to the disproportionate power of dominant social groups. If the aim of a democracy is to try to give everyone an equal say in decision-making, then its systematic bias in favour of dominant groups needs to be corrected, and quotas are one way of doing that.

5. Non-majoritarian decision-making

This last point connects nicely with the issue I raised earlier about the tendency of majoritarian decision-making procedures to ignore the interests and perspectives of minorities. For minorities to be constantly out-voted is another way democratic procedures can depart from the democratic ideal of an equal say for all. We review in our book some of the key forms of non-majoritarian decision-making and I will only summarize some points here.

One line of thought that has a lot of currency in contemporary democratic theory is that decision-making should be more deliberative in character, aiming to achieve a consensus based on good reasons rather than a result reflecting the power plays of interested participants, and various experiments have been carried out in this vein. It is not that easy to institutionalize deliberative democracy, though, because when the chips are down it is hard to find institutional mechanisms to stop people using their power to pursue their interests.

A second promising direction to look in is the use of non-majoritarian voting procedures. I know that the Commission had a submission from Peter Emerson of the de Borda Institute on this question, an Institute with which I also have an association, and all I would say is that although I am less inclined than Peter to think that majoritarianism is the root of nearly all evils, I think it is worth looking at the value of non-majoritarian systems as procedures for reflecting the views of significant marginalized minorities (see Dummett 1984; Dummett 1997; Emerson 1994).

A third alternative to majoritarianism is inter-group agreement, that is, that instead of deciding issues by following the wishes of the majority, you decide them by finding policies that all the relevant groups can agree to. This is in fact the model of a negotiated settlement in industrial relations and of partnership in decision-making more generally, and it is a key dimension of the Belfast Agreement in Northern Ireland. A weaker version is a commitment to 'consult' with all interested parties: that's the form it tends to take when dealing with groups like Travellers or disabled people.

All of these ideas are likely to be objected to by people who identify democracy with majority rule, but that is a simple mistake. The real problem with all of them is not that they give minorities too much power but that they give them too little, since all three processes are still likely to lead to decisions that are weighted disproportionately towards the interests of the majority.

6. Extension of democratic participation to different spheres

The final proposal I think it is worth mentioning today for promoting equality is the extension of democracy to areas of collective decision-making outside the formal sphere of government. If we are interested in empowering marginalized groups as a way of reducing inequality, then we have to recognize that many of the key decisions that disempower these groups take place outside the sphere of the state: in families, schools, religious congregations, housing estates, welfare offices, workplaces and boardrooms. So democratizing these institutions would play a direct role in reducing inequality. In addition, as I said at the start, all of these settings are schools of citizenship. If they are organized in an authoritarian way, it should come as no surprise that people find it difficult to participate democratically in the formal political system. This theme of extending democracy throughout social relations is obviously a big one and way too far-ranging to pursue today, but I think it would be a pity if it weren't on the Commission's agenda.

Chicken and egg

Those, then, are some ideas about how democracies can be designed to reduce inequalities. But there remains the chicken-and-egg problem I mentioned early on, namely that existing levels of inequality in society generate inequalities of participation which in turn reduce the likelihood of policies being adopted that will counteract these tendencies. The political capacity of marginalized groups is limited by the inequalities that structure their lives and opportunities. But how far will members of privileged groups go towards levelling the playing field when the field is clearly tipped in their favour?

I do not think that there is any easy answer to this problem, and it is not particularly my brief here to suggest one. But I do think that yet another item that should not fall off the Commission's agenda is the question of developing a strategy through which whatever recommendations it makes can be implemented. I would suggest that such a strategy would include a serious dialogue with and mobilization of the marginalized groups I have mentioned.

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