

## Mobilising Democracy to Tackle Climate Change

Report of an event held on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> April 2010 at Goodenough College, London

### Preface

This report is drawn exclusively from the contributions of participants at an event on 'Mobilising Democracy to Tackle Climate Change' which was held at London's Goodenough College on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> April 2010. The event was organised by Schumacher College, Salzburg Global Seminar and the Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development, with the support of Goodenough College. The speakers who inspired group reflections and participant feedback and whose ideas are liberally sprinkled throughout this report were Jay Griffiths, Ian Christie, Simon Retallack, Julie Richardson and Marc Hudson. All of the participants were also generous in contributing their insights, ideas, and stories. These too flavour this report.

Rapid, effective and fair action on climate change calls for radical innovation in democratic decision-making and in the mobilisation of citizens and organisations of all kinds to act differently. The challenges are multiple. Many citizens and other interests in the world's democracies do not accept the overwhelming scientific evidence that climate change is being dramatically and dangerously affected by human activities. The evidence to date indicates that it is the more vulnerable and least politically powerful who are most negatively affected by climate change. Unsustainable models of economic growth and consumption continue to dominate political discourse. And yet the mobilisation of citizens is vital if we are to achieve meaningful change on climate issues. Governments and corporate interests cannot or will not do it alone.

Our event focused on one central question: *what innovations are needed in democracy and participatory decision-making if we want them to deliver the actions needed to mitigate and adapt to climate change?*

With Eyjafallajoekull clearing Europe's skies of aircraft as we met, the volcano's power served as a reminder that the Earth is far more than simply a backdrop to a conversation about how best to mobilise democracy to tackle climate change.

### The problem with democracies

There should be no debate about the desirability of democracy. Democracy is essential. But democracies are problematic, plagued, in their actually-existing form, by stagnation and complacency, and too closely tied to economic growth and consumer affluence.

What, then, is the case for democracy? Democracy is the best 'clumsy institution' so far devised to enable humans to make well informed and accountable decisions, and to arrive at accommodations among competing values and ideas. It is the best available form of government.

Climate change is often referred to as a crisis, and two key sequential questions then are: 'what does crisis do to politics' and 'how could we build resilience'? In war-time, a temporary suspension of democracy has the potential to be benign. Some environmentalists and climate activists even yearn for a temporary benign dictatorship. But unlike war-time emergencies that don't last forever, climate change will. And whilst we can all be happily 'against war', being against climate change is much more difficult. There is an assumption, too, that authoritarian states are somehow free from politics or vested interests. In reality that is very far from the case.

The case for democracy is strong on other grounds, too. Democracy is associated with good governance in ways that authoritarianism never can be. In the USSR, laws and regulations were Potemkin-like, little more than facades erected on a crumbling edifice. Democracy offers a system of feedbacks far more effective than other systems fatally flawed by self-deception.

And yet, the challenge is to find ways to live up to the virtues of democracy. For the effectiveness of democracy is diminished by many flaws. There is a 'path dependency' around democracy, in which we keep doing what we have always done because we have always done it.

Is democracy without growth possible? What could it look like without the promise of endless improvements in living standards, or with quality of life and sustainable development as its goals? Democracy also faces major challenges in giving voice to unrepresented interests: how to bring a concern for the Global South within decision-making in the rich North? How to take account of future generations? Democracy also suffers from a problem of time – temporal horizons – for it has great difficulty in tackling the long-term.

The writer Colin Crouch has highlighted the problem of 'post-democracy'. The bloom goes off democracy, he argues, after the big wins are secured, and what then emerges is 'post-democracy' – democracy with all the excitement leached out of it. Crouch sees democracy being hollowed out somewhat by mass affluence and consumerism, and by globalisation, which has reduced national political capacity and the will to go against the grain of international market forces. Globalisation thus makes national politics less significant, narrowing the effective range of policy options and identities offered by the main parties. John Keane has written about 'monitory democracy' as the model in which we currently find ourselves; it is one in which there is plenty of 'monitoring' and feedback loops, but coupled with a high degree of populism and cynicism.

If environmental politics were to be taken seriously, there would be great demands on us. For political leaders want the technofixes that can continue to allow consumerism to flourish. Worse still, politicians are even recasting their role as leaders, becoming mere legislators or policy-making functionaries. At the same time, one of the impacts of neoliberalism is that it makes coalitions less likely to succeed across society; empathy becomes a harder emotion to invoke as the distance between those at the bottom and those at the top increases. John Kampfner goes so far as to highlight a risk that the process of democratisation may have reached its high water mark.

Democracy is now at risk of sclerosis. And yet we forget how young democracy is, and that there is, there must be, a vast amount of innovation still to come. What has been, historically, is not a good guide to what could be for the future.

### **The promise of innovation**

So what kinds of democratic developments offer promise for the future as we seek to mobilise people – as citizens and in organizations – to address climate change?

The UK has been relatively good at bringing long-term vision into every-day democracy with innovations such as the UK Office for Science and Technology Foresight programme. The interaction between representative, participatory and the so-called ‘monitory’ democracy of public scrutiny and wider transparency is also improving as successive governments and citizens experiment to find the most appropriate combinations of expertise, representation, participation and accountability. The Internet offers new feedback loops and accountability mechanisms, and the blogosphere provides a way of decentralising democracy and allowing it to cross borders (albeit one in need of more evolved rules of engagement). At the level of cities and local communities, innovation in climate action is flourishing.

Outside the UK, other innovations are beginning to take root. Hungary’s ‘green ombudsman’ (the Parliamentary Commissioner for Future Generations) creates space for a conversation that would not otherwise happen, but for effectiveness must be connected to the outside world so as not to become a fig-leaf. In Ecuador, a new Constitution now admits nature as a litigant as a result of a process of constitutional renovation that is rarely seen in the West.

One solution to the problem of ‘mobilisation’ is more participative democracy. Participatory democracy has the potential significantly to improve civic engagement, but a great deal of re-engineering is needed to support public participation to reach its potential. Participatory democracy entails much more than just improving public meetings. Since the 1960s significant innovations have taken place in supporting more direct and participative forms of people engagement in decision-making within local communities and the workplace, and in particular around strengthening the voice of young people and other previously ignored and generally non-voting parts of society.

Alongside innovations in participation and participatory processes, there is also potential to reinvigorate citizens’ sense of connection with democracy by means of greater experimentation with the pursuit of the Athenian option of selecting people by lot. And we need also to make more of the potential of deliberative democracy. Deliberation and debate need to be seen as an essential precursor to any increase in the use of ‘direct democracy’, for example through the use of referenda.

In Europe and the UK, one of the problems is that our politicians act principally as legislators. And if legislation is not and can never be the total solution to the problem of climate change, we could be wasting our time in only targeting *government* to offer solutions. We need to explore the wider roles that politicians at European, national and local levels can play beyond simply acting as legislators. What, for example, is the role of our elected representatives in enabling civil society to become more informed and active in

ways that can help to mitigate and adapt to climate change? For whilst there is a strong argument that tackling climate change almost certainly doesn't need a command economy and centralised government, it does require a closer synergy between top-down and bottom up-action: it calls for a more genuinely authentic partnership between elected representatives, governments and an actively mobilised civil society working internationally, nationally and locally.

Ideally, democracy and power need to be more equally spread, and in that process of redistribution the power of the media needs also to be tackled. There needs to be a debate on the governance of the mass media, which often works to demobilise, mystify and confuse democracy, not bring vitality to it. The mass media, whether it is publicly or privately owned, has an enormously powerful role to play in mobilising citizens to take action on climate change, but it needs to play that role much more responsibly than it has to date.

The same might be said for the general marketing and advertising sector. As companies such as the UK's Marks & Spencer with its 'Plan A' are now evidencing, there is real potential to harness their marketing expenditure to raise awareness of climate change and the need for carbon reduction, and thereby to alter consumer (and hence citizen) behaviour.

Liberal democracy can struggle to take proper account of the interests of future generations and other 'non-voting' stakeholders, or to bring a cogent sense for the long-term future impacts of actions (or omissions) in the present. Climate change stretches democracy in both respects. To help put democracy on track to deliver effective climate change mitigation and adaptation, the UK's House of Lords might be reformed as a 'House of the Future'. Perhaps, in such a reformed model, a Council of Elders and a Council of Youth could form part of the structure. New kinds of selection, rather than election, might provide a basis for involvement in the House of the Future, though it can be difficult to square such suggestions with an idea of 'democracy' as principally connected to 'voting'.

Like an old idea about 'festivals of participatory democracy', a new national holiday in every election year might be dubbed 'deliberation day' or 'democracy day', to promote wider reflection on democracy and key issues facing society. Citizens might even be paid a 'citizens' wage' for the day to reflect on what they *really* think.

### **The problem of global governance, democracy and climate change**

The process and outcome of the December 2009 Copenhagen Climate Summit also offer indications both of the possible, and the real-world constraints.

At the most general level, the fact that so many leaders and negotiators turned up to engage with the Copenhagen climate talks is encouraging. But the Copenhagen Climate Accord which was the principal formal outcome of the Summit does not contain any long-term targets, nor any emissions reduction targets. Neither is there any agreement even on the latest year of any peak in emissions, no short-term emissions cuts, nor a developing country action plan for 2020. There are no specific financial pledges but simply a 'pledge and review' process with no scope to negotiate the pledges upwards.

These weaknesses reflect a UN climate regime that is in crisis, with deep polarisation of positions. There is very significant fear of a grave loss of momentum. At the same time, the impression given in the media was of chronic mismanagement of the proceedings by the Danish hosts, and insufficient space for civil society to take part. The most serious allegation leveled by the media was that developed countries were looking to impose negotiating text on developing countries.

In reality, national political processes were as much a problem as any poor process management. President Obama was unable to offer any more than a 4% cut in emission below 1990 levels by 2020, and coupled even that with an insistence on a very aggressive investment regime for China. China came to the table with an *intensity* target for emissions (per unit of GDP), and refused to allow a legally binding outcome. At the same time, it is clear that both the US and China understand that the atmosphere is a very valuable resource: they do not want to be part of a deal that provides for a lock-in of that resource, or threatens economic growth with a legally binding target. In practice, the politics associated with alternative means of pricing carbon to bring low carbon economic development within reach are likely to be as difficult as those associated with less market-oriented measures.

‘What next’ is a very big question without an obvious answer.

The United States wants to base a future climate regime on the Copenhagen Accord. In contrast, the position of developing countries is that the Accord should be integrated within a twin-track approach based on the Kyoto Protocol with the addition of a track addressing issues associated with the provision of finance and resources.

The 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change works on the basis of ‘one country one vote’. But in Copenhagen, some countries were accused of ignoring that basic principle. Some governments have gone so far as to conclude that we need less democracy not more at the global level. And the fact that how much a nation emits is the principal source of power in climate talks also leads to arguments that this real world fact needs simply to be recognised, and arguments about decision-making based on ‘one country one vote’ or on ‘democratisation’ of intergovernmental decision-making more widely ditched.

Proposals for reform have also been floated in which groups of countries would be represented on a regional basis. There is a very high chance that such suggestions will be blocked, however. And whilst non United Nations fora (e.g. the G20) will also likely be used to lay some of the ground for a future climate deal, none of these fora are designed to deliver legally binding options.

In practice, none of these proposals are likely to make a great deal of difference given the urgency of the issue.

There is a paradox, too, in that whilst there are frequent calls for ‘strong leadership’ on the part of climate advocates, voters in democracies must also give their leaders permission to impose costs on their citizens. And politicians won’t be able to offload costs on voters unless

voters understand the evidence and the rationale for action and are empowered to contribute towards solving the problem. So for the future, there needs to be much more focus on bringing voters on board as informed, responsible and active players. Yet sadly, the climate change message with its implication for less carbon-based economic growth is not the easiest to sell. If the costs of action are likely to be £100 billion a year by 2020, how can we possibly expect to absorb such costs without voter support, whether the country concerned is a democracy or not, not least at a time of economic recession?

Unless the right national conditions are in place, we will not be able to secure change at the global level. At the end of the day, we need national policies supported by the electorate. And whilst there is a need for strong civil society advocacy, civil society needs to do a better job of bringing the wider public with it.

With or without a global deal, people still need to take local action on climate change. Sadly, however, a 'demobilisation' of citizens and governments has already happened, post-Copenhagen, as other issues come to the fore. Media and commentator generalisations also abound over opinion polls which purport to report a rise in scepticism, particularly in the UK and US, about whether the climate is changing in ways that are attributable to human activities.

An increase in community-based actions and in campaigning will help to build national consensus on climate change; but it is important, too, to diversify the framing of climate messages. And whilst there is no obvious 'three-point action plan' for the next steps in the climate agenda, there are a few things that clearly need to happen. Certainly, there needs to be a shift in emphasis from a focus *on* the political space towards a much greater focus on communication *in* the public space. Decarbonisation of the electricity sector is another obvious and immediate priority.

### **Practical insights for mobilisation**

What, in practice, could mobilise people, individually or collectively, to take action on climate change and thereby help to mobilise democracy? Existing grass-roots campaigns and community-based action offer some insights.

In the UK, the burgeoning Transition Town movement (see [www.transitionnetwork.org](http://www.transitionnetwork.org)) aims to build resilience to climate change and Peak Oil, as well as enhancing community resilience. The movement focuses particularly on the challenge of Peak Oil (a term which refers to the point at which global oil production peaks, following which a process of irreversible decline in production commences), grounded in the insight that there must come a time when collectively we are forced to shift towards 'energy descent'. The Transition movement then focuses on self-organised community level energy descent. The movement makes wide use of Open Space techniques for decision-making to encourage wide citizen participation. It makes use of 'the head and the heart' as well as 'the hands'; and it calls on participants consciously to seek to learn from the Elders of society and communities.

Transition functions as a huge experiment, in which some endeavours will work and some won't. Building bridges from these experimental, self-organised initiatives to local

government (and hence, local level representative democracy) is increasingly considered essential within the movement. There is tremendous scope to find ways to ensure that the initiative is a force for transformation of representative democracy. As such, Transition is an experiment that could help foster a vision of a new pathway towards mobilisation of democracy for effective climate action – a kind of ‘ginger group’ engagement with representative democracy.

Against this positive vision of civil society action working to address climate and energy issues, there is a risk that activism on climate change could simply become part of a self-congratulatory ‘smugosphere’ in which action is not matched with impact and ‘activists’ are concerned more to feel good about themselves than to be effective.

What is needed is more ‘transruptive’ action: action that is at one and the same time transformative and disruptive. Both democracy and established thinking and methods for running campaigns need to be ‘transrupted’. For example, civil society meetings in which a small elite runs boring meetings are unlikely to generate lasting change.

Appealing more to people to take action within their professional (as distinct from personal) lives may offer a useful way to ‘scale up’ the impact of individual action on climate change. But the problem of a focus on the professional sphere is that it can be harder for individuals to start new initiatives in their professional than their personal lives.

The corporate sector is primarily driven, not by altruism, but by profit. And corporate lobbyists, particularly from fossil fuel-dependent sectors including the petro-chemical and automobile sectors, are active in seeking to influence and some argue undermine democratic action to tackle climate change. Political and social democracy are important routes not only to realise the potential of ‘enlightened business’ through market forces, but also to ensure that businesses are, where appropriate, *required* to pursue responsible practice. When democracy is viewed as a social and an organisational construct, the advocacy and activist techniques of active citizenship may just as usefully be deployed to influence shareholders and the boards of companies as to influence government.

### **Visions of success and stories of possible futures**

If these are some of the challenges, and some of the ingredients for innovation in mobilising democracy to tackle climate change, how might democracy evolve for the future? What would ‘success’ look like? As participants at the Seminar worked to create visions of innovation, and stories about how those innovations might come about, it became clear that the challenge of climate change was simply a motif around which to build ideas, with much broader relevance, on the features more generally of an ‘ideal’ democracy. Climate change is a useful entry point to examining the weaknesses and drawbacks of ‘democracies’ and democracy as currently practised; but ideas for how to tackle those weaknesses and drawbacks offer insights for anyone concerned to craft better systems of democracy for all.

One vision of the future is offered by the idea of ‘organic democracy’ as a system that responds directly to the challenge of mobilising democracy to tackle climate change. “Organic democracy”, a term coined by participants during the event, would describe a form of democracy that would actively nurture the kind of ‘emergence’ and new and transformed

forms of leadership that can bring us back into balance across economic, cultural and political spaces. Dialogue not dominance would be at the heart of public engagement. In this new system, everyone would feel themselves an agent of change, not an unwilling servant of a political elite or cliques wherever they might be found.

Organic democracy would likely be associated with a stronger decision-making role based on bioregions and ideas of 'ecological space'. It would be resilient in the face of invasion of cultural or civil society space by the economic and political spaces that tend to dominate today. And in an organic democracy, leadership would more closely be tied to cultural space than to the political sphere that is currently so closely tied into the economic.

A key ingredient in an organic democracy would be for many more people to engage. If people had shared values, it would become easier to take the steps that are necessary to tackle climate change. Shared values could emerge out of a sense of belonging linked to the decision-making processes in which people had engaged. Deliberative processes, in the journey towards organic democracy, might involve people moving through a staged process of pre-contemplation, contemplation, action and reflection. This process cannot be immediate; however, it is one in which people return with greater trust time after time.

The processes of organic democracy are ones in which all people are understood as inherently 'good' and risk is pooled. And they can be found in a wide variety of spaces, including workplaces, community gatherings like the 'Big Lunch', and virtual (Internet) spaces too. Twin towns also offer inspiration, since they not only ground people, but also place them in different and unfamiliar settings in a spirit of partnership.

How could a vision of 'organic democracy' come about? Collaborative storytelling helps to unlock creative thinking about the future and create visions of what might be possible. For example, the idea of a 'democracy game' is one metaphor and also a communication tool for the current state of democracy and how it might play out. And as in a board game which is a mixture of skill and luck, there is no failure in being unsure or not knowing which way to face into the future.

In the snakes and ladders game of democratic innovation and contraction, there is an inherent challenge in ensuring that the dice are not loaded in favour of vested interests. The rules of the game need to allow for experimentation, and for totally unforeseen events to play a disruptive role. Flutes, for example, might charm away snakes; and we should remember that snakes are not all bad anyway. In the final square of the game lies a vision of a sustainable world. For that must always be the end goal.

As these stories and the 'mobilising democracy to tackle climate change' event show, democracy has to be more than the occasional tepid vote. It must be about public dialogue and conversation. And in that dialogue, and in those conversations, efforts to involve cultural influencers and artists, in turn, should be understood as part of the process of enabling democracy to tackle climate change. For there is art in mobilising democracy to tackle climate change, not political science or politics alone. And like the story-tellers at our event, artists are among the messengers of democracy; they are messengers who need the best messages. Art can act as an adjunct to change; allowing the expression of new ideas

and changing the views of its human subjects. Art can comprehend the complexity of climate change, and art can convey its messages without propaganda. It can help to create the culture that nurtures nature; for culture without nature amounts to little more than a few shoddy catalogues, and prejudice against nature is as vacuous and as cruel as racism.

***Story from the Future 1: Womens' liberation and Central Africa lead the way to organic democracy***

*"Our story begins in 2010. A group of people from around the world were trapped in places they thought they had only stopped temporarily – for a weekend break, or a holiday. Volcanic activity kept planes from the skies for weeks on end. And as these stranded voyagers dusted off forgotten resources and skills to find their ways home, they began conversations with strangers that were to change their lives for the better, providing resources for less individualistic decision-making that would surprise politicians and decision-makers for years to come.*

*Meanwhile across Central Africa, Korean investment in ICT infrastructure was beginning to provide a vehicle for the liberation of women and girls. The nations of Central Africa were able to leapfrog over the costly mistakes and learning processes of other countries. Some of the features of this new knowledge economy included understanding the resources of the land and reading the signs of nature and where to find food and other riches. Traditional African deliberative democracy rose resurgent, with communities debating actions and resolving their differences around trees in thousands of village squares. In this revived democracy, with women fully engaged, the boundaries of decision-making were not the political constituency of old, but ecosystem boundaries and geography. African ubuntu led to more empathy between people of different backgrounds, and it seemed that the future was bright. But that was not the case. Over time, conflicts began to arise across the region as water scarcity exacerbated by climate change created tensions. As many as half of all men killed each other or died of AIDS.*

*And the women, empowered by Africa's new knowledge economy, rose up and said that they would take matters into their own hands. In 2020 the African Union set up a virtual colloquium on dialogue and invited story-tellers, and the approach that they set influenced all other countries. The UK brought its experience of political juries to this forum: it introduced empowered citizens' juries as a less aggressive form of decision-making than adversarial debate and political sparring.*

*Other natural disasters began to bite too: a new plant virus which affected cereal crops caused people to seek new seeds from places where subsistence farming continued and where the seedstock was not vulnerable to the new virus. As millions of Bangladeshis were displaced by climate change, nations united to provide succour. In China, where people had begun to be badly affected by climate change and water pollution of crops, people began to organise themselves, and to take their wishes to government. The people created an organic democracy and brought it to the government.*

*With Chinese economic growth in the second decade of the century largely dependent on resources from Africa, the newly empowered continent was able to act much more effectively.”*

***Story from the Future 2: A House of the Future***

*“In around 2010, a major constitutional imbroglio erupted in the UK and scandal rocked the House of Lords. Something new, politicians and the people who elected them realised, must be put in place to replace the Second Chamber. A second chamber without any function would, of course, be simply a huge amount of trouble. But people couldn’t agree what should replace the House of Lords, and initial experiment in reform during 2011 just didn’t work.*

*At about this time, severe weather events began to erupt across the UK. People began to realise just how many big developments had been built on flood plains and how out of date the Thames Barrier was. There was a flooding crisis. Even Royal Palaces flooded. A scandal erupted when the truth emerged about how economists and decision-makers discount the future. And so an option for the Second House presented itself: a House of the Future.*

*And so began a national debate about how best to equip such a House to address the future. Democracy, of course, is actually a process; it is not an end in itself. But society has accepted the end of tackling climate change. If a Second House works to tackle climate change simply by replicating what is already there, representatives in that House will be scared of being kicked out, and will simply replace the current flaws of the system. If a second chamber is distanced from the people, it might not do its job as not a chamber for the future. But bring in too many experts and you might find yourself sacrificing democracy to tackle climate change. And so too went the debate: for the question of how far we can ‘rig’ democracy to tackle climate change before we must consider it eroded as both practice and as ideal is a key question for the future”.*

***Note by Halina Ward, Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development, London, July 2010 (halina.ward@fdsd.org)***

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