

Representative democracy for real

1. Set up electronic voting at polling stations. This makes it possible to type in the name of your chosen candidate, wherever they are resident. You are no longer limited to a shortlist imposed on you by a constituency or a party. You vote for an individual you trust.
2. For election a candidate needs a fixed number of votes, for example, 70,000. Candidates who fall short can transfer their votes to others closer to the threshold. Similarly, winning candidates transfer their surplus votes. This way no vote goes wasted.

This basic reform would transform political decision-making and, for the first time in history, make it highly representative of considered opinion across the whole of society. The system can be fine-tuned, in particular, there is an obvious need to:

3. Set up several separate assemblies for distinct areas of political concern, for example, infrastructure, education, foreign policy, the raising of taxes, etc. Voters would be enabled to register their views in a focussed way, instead of being forced to choose a package containing simultaneously policies they endorse and others they reject. A second general chamber can be retained to coordinate between these policy areas, to demarcate areas of responsibility, to confirm or overturn controversial decisions, and to provide other oversight.

Several sets of inevitably overlapping issues present themselves.

One is the extent to which the present system in all of its manifestations (i.e. in the various supposedly democratic countries) is failing us and must therefore be replaced and, in some countries, replaced urgently.

A second is to spell out some effects of the reform, respond to obvious objections, and explain the thinking behind it. It would, for example, mean an end to an official opposition and the focus on formal leaders. It would see the role of political parties being replaced, either immediately or over time, by think tanks, which (in contrast to parties) have no power to discipline independent minds or informal adherents. The thinking here is that, wherever practical, power should be dispersed, rather than being concentrated in a few hands, as happens with party hierarchies and when parties act as cartels. Dispersal of power allows for decisions to be made on the basis of reasoned argument and shared priorities instead of, as now, either for popular effect or else to placate a lobby.

A third set of issues arise from the need to fine-tune the reform so as to pre-empt possible abuse and to ensure smooth functioning. Decisions need to be made in a timely manner, and sometimes they will remain controversial even among well-intentioned, properly informed people who have given them much thought. It might be supposed that the system presented here would lead to paralysis; it is argued, on the contrary, that it is the present system that generates paralysis in essential matters by encouraging

minor changes where major reforms are imperative.

A fourth set of issues is the mechanics. How would campaigning be organised and financed? How would one become a candidate? Who would control the voting machines, how would access to them be governed, how would they be designed? Would it not be too costly?

A fifth set of issues is to place the scheme in a historical context and to contrast it with other proposed reforms and political movements.

A sixth and most crucial set of issues is, of course, how the reform might come about. It could involve a gradual (piecemeal) process, not least as a new generation comes of age in the era of the internet, or bide its time in waiting as a revolutionary response to a massive collapse of institutions such as might occur in a financial, environmental or other crisis. Once introduced in one or two countries, observers would become familiar with the principle and it could rapidly become the default scheme for quality democracy.