

RESHUFFLING THE CARDS

with Fuzzy Democracy

I.

The starting point is the assertion that political parties now undermine everywhere good governance and fail to provide real democratic accountability. Absolutely, the solution is not to form a new political party, wherever and however constituted. Whereas there may have been a time when political parties were necessary, new technologies mean that they no longer have any justification. Indeed, they work against the efforts of those in civil society who offer cogent proposals to address the many problems of our time.

Hence the general task is to design an electoral system

- which is highly representative of the considered opinions of all engaged citizens and
- that can function without political parties (i.e. parties as presently constituted throughout the supposedly democratic world)

This system will have the specific aims of

- enabling each citizen to vote for an individual who (much more closely than today) represents their own political outlook & opinions (rather than, as now, voting for a compromise candidate; or, more likely, merely voting for the least bad party; or instead just refusing to vote)

- enabling anyone with core personal support of just a few hundred fellow citizens to stand for election, to canvass further support without resort to a public relations machine, and to have the prospect of giving a political voice even to minority or unfashionable standpoints
- minimising “horse-trading” or, rather, making such horse-trading as inevitably occurs transparent for all to see; (i.e. instead of compromises and manipulation disappearing behind closed doors, as happens now, under the pretense of “consensus-building”)
- discouraging the cult of personality (and of media celebrity) in politics and replacing it with a focus on strength of character and quiet competence
- ending “winner-takes-all” mechanisms: these arbitrarily magnify slight and artificial majorities, usually suppressing the representation of deeply-held convictions of large minorities and occasionally of actual majorities when these fail to rally around a single platform or leader
- assuring stable government because political posturing becomes well-nigh impossible and disputes over individual matters cannot easily infect other issues.

The envisaged electoral system - for which the originator has coined the phrase Fuzzy Democracy - achieves these aims by enabling not the voters (as under alternative

vote schemes), but the candidates to transfer votes. It abolishes traditional constituencies. This is made practicable by using electronic voting machines. Finally, it introduces a genuinely random element at the final step in the process in order to keep in check inflated egos and horse-trading. Under the present dispensation, by contrast, the element of luck is located at the beginning of the process, when candidates are selected to stand, although it is not apparent how great a role luck plays.

The system would work in principle without this final element, and possibly it is at present too radical a departure from habits of thought for most people to accept. There is generally too little awareness of how much in our present systems involves a degree of happenstance. Perhaps first we need elements of random selection in other processes of appointment, instead of quotas, for example, and then the idea could slowly take hold and become respectable.

For there are compelling reasons for the introduction of a deliberate element of chance:

The political process tends to attract the wrong types of people while discouraging many of the right type from getting involved. The situation varies from country to country, and from time to time, and it is not being asserted that there are not many capable persons of conviction in politics, although ability and conviction are not always found together. It is being asserted that there are not enough of these, and that their hands are

often tied, and that there are disproportionately many elected representatives who are arrogant, manipulative, superficial, inauthentic, self-centred and worse. It is also being asserted that, in the wider population, and particularly among the professions (loosely defined), there is a wealth of talent to be tapped, indeed that there are countless hard-working, mature and highly intelligent people with the experience of life so often absent among today's politicians, good people who have long since more or less despaired, turned their backs on political involvement, not least intimidated or worn out by the many scoundrels, and have gone into a kind of internal migration. They are not often people who like to promote themselves or who seek attention.

There is a widespread notion that, given a group of several persons all of whom are reasonably well-qualified as candidates for a job, or a political appointment, or a campaign, or some other special task or role, it is possible to know now which will be the very best. This is the error of spurious precision. It is also the presumptuousness of aiming for a theoretical ideal instead of the realistic modesty involved in accepting our limits and limitations. Possibly one candidate will later turn out to be the best imaginable, but this not something that we - or a committee - can establish in advance. Not only because the future is unknowable, or at least the detail of the future is unknowable, but because we do not have the means to measure and weigh subtle differences with any reliability. At this point in

the process the only sound - or fair - way to proceed is to let chance decide. This might be done by tossing a series of coins or by a more sophisticated procedure: there merely has to be ceremonial publicity to avert all suspicion of manipulation.

(This approach also resolves the vexed issue of gender quotas. Instead of insisting that a certain proportion of top positions must be filled by women - incidentally, no-one ever advocates that a minimum proportion of menial or dead-end jobs should be filled by men! - with the result that there is suspicion that the selected women have obtained their position because of their gender rather than on their merits, we could insist that, for boardrooms and elsewhere, the final selection should proceed in a public ceremony of chance allocation. Sometimes women would get selected, but by chance from a pool of equally well-qualified candidates of both sexes. Obviously the procedure could be practised at a variety of levels and in many different settings. In less formal contexts it happens all the time, and always has.)

Chance always plays a big role in life generally, of course, but, in the selection processes of the political parties in particular, it is kept hidden, and a pretence of rationality is maintained instead. Candidates are preselected in obscurity, and voters are presented with a minimum of choice. Party democracy is minimal democracy.

II.

The problems addressed here are endemic across the whole of the supposedly democratic world. Democracy must mean more than freedom of speech or a discussion culture, and more than the rule of law or the hegemony of markets. It must mean, at the least, that all those who take some time and trouble to form a considered opinion on some of the many topics of public concern can register their opinion effectively. It must mean that when an argument is won outright, which does happen sometimes, corresponding changes are made to government policy swiftly rather than, as happens frequently, the outcome of the debate being ignored by the powerful. Democracy does not mean that ill-considered policies are imposed on the basis that a majority has spoken when that majority is wholly artificial, manufactured or gerrymandered. While perfection in these matters is unobtainable in practice and, by the nature of the matter, in theory as well, the imperfections we are subject to now are monstrous. From the USA to Israel, from the United Kingdom to Italy, at the Franco-German core of Europe and on the periphery of the democratic world. not a year, indeed hardly a month goes by without some kind of obvious democratic failure as faction fights faction or urgent decisions are delayed; and it will not for ever remain a war of words alone. The legitimacy of democratic governance is everywhere in doubt.

Moving towards a different dispensation - to a more finely-tuned democratic order - will be a task for more than one generation as the natural rigidity of habit & thought of the many, in coalition with vested and often misplaced interests, drives more agile but frustrated spirits close to despair. It is not a matter of right or left, nor is it a complete break with tradition. A beginning can be made at a small-scale level, and people will gradually get used to the ideas outlined below.

Whenever there is an acute crisis, the voice for a rupture in the way decisions are made and declared legitimate will grow louder. The answer to bankruptcy - the intellectual, moral and political bankruptcy of the present dispensation - is to start again and to start differently.

It is no objection to maintain, as a counsel of despair, that the proposal has no practical prospect of realisation in today's world, this year or next. The world will change, certainly, and then it is good to know which direction of change to advocate. No progress can be made without some idea of which way to go. In order to hope, one must know what one hopes for. It is no good waiting until the crisis of crises is upon us, and only then to start reflecting.

III.

The proposal for Fuzzy Democracy is not designed for any specific country but, as a European, the author has in mind first & foremost the nations of Europe and especially those now most in economic and consequently political crisis.

We should consider briefly why political parties became necessary in the first place and how, when challenged, they will justify their existence. The problem is the aggregation of dozens of often only semi-articulate opinions and approaches held strongly or weakly by many millions of voters on topics major and minor, changing over time, occasionally even bending to the force of argument.

A consideration of the immensity of this challenge also shows quickly why Swiss-style referenda can, at best, be only an occasional or stop-gap measure. Each issue has to be formulated such that a yes/no choice is acceptable to most voters. The number of referenda must be kept reasonably small. People must be relied on to vote on the matter on the ballot, and not see their vote as a surrogate for a vote of confidence in a party or their liking for an individual.

As political parties emerged from the autocracies that preceded them, the assumption was that people who thought alike on one set of issues would share similar opinions on others. This still happens more than discriminating spirits would like to think, but is much less frequent than in the past. Elsewhere on this website

an argument is made for the creation of separate assemblies to decide on distinct and largely separate policy areas (for example, transport, education, defence, health and even, separately, tax collection and government expenditure). This solution is separate to but wholly compatible with Fuzzy Democracy.

Political parties present us with bundles (Latin: *fascēs*) of policies. You cannot pick and choose. Even if we had dedicated assemblies for different policy areas, we would still be confronted with bundles without the possibility of differentiating. There is an additional complication. One votes either for a real individual (nonetheless, normally preselected by their party) or for a list of people who are little more than loyal party functionaries. Not infrequently there is a conflict between trust (or mistrust) in the candidate and one's support for the line advocated by the candidate. One may, for example, consider the candidate to be an opportunist who does not really support the line they claim to advocate.

Basically, the task of aggregating (combining and representing) the myriad opinions described above is impossible. No wonder that it seems bundles, pre-packaged by political parties, are the only way forward. Yet there is another approach, seemingly radical but in fact ancient, but also one made much more practical by the internet and data processing. Fuzziness is meanwhile a familiar and validated concept in the world of mathematics and computing.

Let us pause a moment and consider a completely different area where consensus is achieved after a phase of sometimes passionate dispute: Science, the ultimate success story of modernity.

Here there is a kind of qualified informal voting, with outstanding scientists enjoying enhanced authority by virtue of their recognised expertise and reputation, almost as if they had been the recipients of proxy votes. In order to have a say you must have achieved something, if only a science degree. Some scientists are recognised as having achieved more, and are credited by their peers as knowing more, than others. Such senior researchers find that their word and judgement enjoy more weight, without any one individual having the last say. We non-scientists in turn understand that scientists do seriously know much that we do, and so, as long as they remain within the bounds of science, we put our trust in them.

For democracy of any kind, by contrast, we do need a relatively rigid formal framework. But the principle still applies that some people are acknowledged as having more understanding than others, and it is these who need to be transported to close to the levers of power. Alongside differences between the realms of science and representative politics, there are structural similarities that can help guide us in re-inventing democracy.

IV.

We have representative democracy because we are too numerous to have direct democracy. Enemies of reform always disparage alternative models by referring to them as direct democracy, but direct democracy has no advocates. Similarly, government by referenda is impossible even if occasional referenda may play a constructive supporting role.

The question now is how the representatives might be selected. One could imagine that each household, or each group of a dozen individuals, would select one of their own, and these delegates would assemble to select one of their number, and so on. There are obvious reasons why this would not work, or not work well, although something like this does operate in some non-Western societies.

The core problem here is that of the constituency. In an earlier version of fuzzy democracy (the present one, midsummer 2013, is full - or fully-fledged - fuzzy democracy), much thought was expended on how to define alternative (i.e. non-geographical) constituencies which would still present voters with a manageable spectrum of candidates. The assumption was that if voters were confronted with too great a choice, choosing would become onerous and people would consequently want to revert to parties, one function of parties being to select candidates and relieve voters of electoral effort. There was also the practical consideration that there must be a limit to the size of a ballot paper. But this

thinking was stuck in the past. A voting machine where you type in the beginning of the name of your chosen candidate solves the problem of long strips of paper; (though you must know before entering the polling booth who you want to vote for.)

There is no requirement to examine all candidates. You can put more or less effort into identifying a candidate you are satisfied with. The system of collating votes is such that formal constituencies are unnecessary.

V.

The following stages constitute the crucial element in fuzzy democracy.

A figure will have been calculated prior to the election as being the number of votes a candidate must receive in order to count as someone with adequate democratic support. Anyone with this threshold number of votes becomes a member of what we might call the *political class*.

Any surplus votes can be redistributed by their owner (i.e. a winning candidate). Hence some prominent persons may have received far more votes than the threshold. They can bestow these surplus votes on candidates who have failed to mark up the required direct support. Hence those surplus votes are not lost, but recycled. (It would also be possible for candidates who fall short of the threshold to redistribute votes among themselves.)

It may be objected that this would involve patronage, leaving the door open to horse-trading (*quid pro quo*); “I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine”. But note that everything is out in the open. It is not possible, nor would it be desirable, for there to be no alliances. The difference to the party system is that the alliances are on an *ad hoc* basis and do not require a party apparatus. In any case, either the candidates who are vote-rich have deserved their votes because they are outstanding candidates or the electorate has failed to do its homework.

We now have perhaps one or two thousand candidates who enjoy substantial democratic support and have therefore entered the political class. This does not mean that they have been elected to parliament!

It is at this point, and at this point only, that a random selection is made. Needless to say, it is imperative that the selection is seen to be random, and there would need to be a suitable ceremony with multiple inspection of whatever method is chosen for the selection.

A decision will have been made on the number of seats in parliament, not too many and not too few. Once constituted, parliament would have to appoint the members of the executive, although not from among themselves. All appointees would have to be selected from among those members of the political elite (or class) who had not been randomly chosen for

membership of parliament. The numbers would be contrived such that there would still be a substantial reserve pool of members of the political class who were neither members of parliament nor members of government.

VI.

This scheme has deliberately left out a lot of detail and discussion of minor alternatives. At such time as the scheme may come to be seriously considered for implementation, at whatever level and in whichever country, whether piecemeal or wholesale, there would be discussion of the niceties. It would be wholly counter-productive to speculate now about how such a discussion might go, but most of the considerations would be of a sort that is familiar and predictable. The purpose of this essay has been to provide original and constructive input on what a legitimate representative democracy would look like and to reply to some obvious objections.