



## The True Nature of Representative Democracy

- Lorissa Kelly

*In this article, Lorissa Kelly explores the history and modern workings of Representative Democracy in the first of a series of articles for Reflective Leaders.*

The nature of the relationship between government and the governed is in a constant state of re-negotiation. A key theme in my research had been the scope of responsibility of the state to its citizenry, or more specifically, politicians to their constituents.

The nature of representative democracy recognises the impossibility of all citizens being involved in every decision making process, thus necessitating the election of representatives of the people to government. Constitutionally, it is politicians that have the ultimate say in policy development and decision making through the power vested in them as elected representatives of the people. In reality however, these decisions are not made alone. The nature of our liberal democracy and pluralist society demands that the views and values of a wide variety of stakeholders are taken into account.

Andrew Heywood (2003) states that representative democracy is a 'limited and indirect form of democracy that is based on the selection (usually by election) of those who will rule on behalf of the people'. The two defining characteristics of representative democracy as defined by Heywood, namely 'indirect' and 'limited' has given rise to discontent in Western democracies. Indeed, it is the feeling of disengagement with the political process that is driving many innovative and controversial trends in communication between politicians and their publics, activities such as citizens juries, community forums and online 'town hall' meetings. The use of direct democracy is most common in Switzerland, where voters are given the opportunity to vote in federal referendums on average four times a year, although a system of representative democracy is maintained.

The work of influential democratic theorist Joseph Schumpeter (1943) attempted to refine previous understandings of democracy to make way for one based on realism. Central to Schumpeter's attack on 'classical democracy' was his belief that the central participatory and decision making role of the people rested on empirically unrealistic foundations. Schumpeter believed that the main role of the citizenry should be to create the conditions for competition among potential decision makers for the people's vote. Schumpeter rejected the notion that citizens should 'bombard' their leaders with letters (emails being the obvious modern equivalent). He believed such actions were an attempt to control the representatives of the people, an idea he argues is against the spirit of democratic governance.

In fact, participation by the 'masses' in the political process was viewed as dangerous throughout much of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. A distrust of participation by the poor and the poorly educated majority has always been a central feature of Western political thought. As Schumpeter relays, 'The electoral mass is incapable of action other than a stampede'. Hence, rather than citizens being involved directly in the policy making process, a system has evolved whereby they must influence intermediaries in order to contribute to the process. The well publicised role of political lobbyists in this process is a case in point. This system has come under fire from those advocating more direct and participatory methods of citizen involvement in the policy process.

Indeed, the nature of participation can differ greatly, from token efforts by government to the empowerment of citizens to choose policy directions directly. As Patrick Bishop and Glyn Davis ask;

'Is participation when government seeks citizen views but still makes an unpalatable decision? Or does meaningful participation require a community veto over policy choices? And if so, who defines the relevant community?'

This provides a thought provoking end to defining the true nature of participative democracy in the modern political climate. Is the traditional distrust of the 'tyranny of the masses' still justified or is it time for a more inclusive, direct form of democracy to take root in Western democratic societies? The issue of who politicians *really* pay attention to will be addressed in a later edition of *Reflective Leaders*.