

»We get the politicians we deserve.«

von Tom Bentley

Nicht nur hier zu Lande stellt sich die Frage, wie Innovationen in der Gesellschaft gefördert werden können. Wie verläuft die Debatte in anderen Demokratien? Kann Deutschland durch die Erfahrung anderer Gesellschaften lernen?

The British general election of 2005 has shown that political legitimacy is hard to come by. It did not renew Tony Blair's authority or transfer legitimacy to any other leader. Instead, it revealed a barely contained public hostility towards professional politics. More people chose not to vote (39 per cent) than voted for the governing Labour party. More than half of the public describe both the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition as 'untrustworthy'.

Crisis of Governance

Any national election is a specific judgement of particular parties and their leaders. But this one also marks the re-emergence of a longer-term pattern which is reflected around the world: the steady decline of trust in politics and attachment to its institutions. The form of nation state democracy that dominated the second half of the twentieth century

is holed below the waterline. People are withdrawing from its rituals and routines. But democracy cannot work on the people's behalf without their active consent.

In Britain, we hope the coronation of new political leaders will 'put things right'. But it is our democratic system that is at fault and is creating a crisis of governance. We go along with the myth of strong leadership until those leaders – almost inevitably – fail to live up to expectations. But when this happens we question only the leader, not our faith in the myth itself, which is perpetuated by the media-based way we consume politics. But the perpetual cycle of hope and failure of strong leaders hides the fact that our democratic system is at fault and we face a crisis of governance. Our politics duck the big and difficult issues like climate change and pensions reform, but at the same time seems unable to put right even small things. So it is not



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just new leaders, but a new democratic settlement, that we need – a paradigm shift in the way we do democracy. The decline of deference is not a bad thing, but when it sweeps away all kinds of public legitimacy we have a fundamental problem. That’s why I say that we get the politicians we deserve, because our opt-out from politics inevitably reduces the legitimacy of leaders.

In an age when people feel they have better things to do, we need to work out how to set public rules that allow us to live good lives together. Over the next generation our societies will have to negotiate profound transitions in social, economic and cultural life. Yet our popular assumptions about sovereignty apply nineteenth- and twentieth-century methods to twenty-first-century problems. Changes to governance, law and regulation are happening, often at the transnational level, but they are largely disconnected from everyday life.

Crisis of Confidence

So while our societies are wealthier, healthier and more open than perhaps ever before, there is a collective crisis of confidence about how to hold them together and adapt to change. Democracy, though an ancient idea, is a relatively recent achievement. In different parts of the world, it is vulnerable to poverty, violence, corruption and exploitation. We have to recognise that the dramatic rebalancing of power going on after the end of the Cold War, and the sudden expansion of the global market, requires both fledgling and mature democracies to reinvent themselves. Democracy should allow us to adapt, without violence, to new realities, according to the best possible ideas we can come up with about how to live. For a century in Western Europe, the preferred way to do this has been through party competition and universal suffrage. Politicians compete to

tell stories that offer a narrative of hope or reassurance, while we project our aspirations and anger onto them.

However, the basis on which politicians make their stories believable is collapsing as our scepticism increases. The danger is that a growing gap between political elites and everyday experience will become a vicious cycle, narrowing the range of choices that politics can offer because it cannot mobilise people to change their behaviour. The erosion of fragile democratic cultures will lead to the breakthrough and dominance of a far more basic and violent form of identity politics. The existence of far right parties in Europe, and of radical Islamic parties in many other countries, illustrates this possibility. The fundamental question for twenty-first-century politics is how to combine market economies with other kinds of value – social, cultural, environmental, public and moral

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– in ways that sustain our societies and our natural environment, and align economic production with human need.

Problems and Challenges

Our shared problems and challenges include:

- how to socialise and educate children, spread opportunity and offer proper care to a burgeoning elderly population
- how to manage the new frontiers of scientific knowledge and power, and to negotiate the close co-existence of different cultures and religious faiths
- how to respond to new sources of economic competition and create the foundations of future prosperity
- how to reverse climate change and protect biodiversity
- how to build cities and suburbs in which everybody can thrive
- how to achieve security without compromising justice, and
- how to address the scale and depth of global economic inequality.

These are major challenges of collective adaptation – they need largescale solutions, expertise, institutional rules – but the new solutions will also rely on mass changes in individual behaviour and on value commitments, not just technical requirements. To adapt successfully means making public rules and institutions legitimate in a context where

obedience to institutional authority is breaking down and personal freedom is creating ever greater social, cultural and ethnic diversity.

In this essay I argue that there is only one logic that offers a way to reconcile these tensions: the logic of democracy. Without renewing democracy at every level, our capacity to succeed as societies, and then as individuals within them, will drain away. Without new forms of democratic sovereignty, innovative and creative changes to our current model of political economy will not emerge. Without the mass exercise of citizenship many of our public traditions and institutions will atrophy. Without a new level of direct citizen participation the legitimacy of our political institutions will continue to decline. Without new cultures of dialogue, exchange and learning, our social differences will overwhelm us. That is why democratising the relationships between people, institutions and public authority is the central challenge of our age.

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About DEMOS

Who we are

Demos is the think tank for everyday democracy. We believe everyone should be able to make personal choices in their daily lives that contribute to the common good. Our aim is to put this democratic idea into practice by working with organisations in ways that make them more effective and legitimate.

What we work on

We focus on six areas: public services; science and technology; cities and public space; people and communities; arts and culture; and global security.