

Christmas tree democracy

What people most dislike about current politics is that they have the feeling that they have lost control of it. And indeed, we have read already for many years about the gap between decision-makers and voters. This gap is clearly noticeable on the national level for a longer time, but since recently, also on the supranational level as we have seen with the European referenda. On first sight, this evolution is bizarre. Never before politicians and civil servants have been so accessible to the public and their activities so transparent. If you want to, you can meet a politician almost every evening, ask him difficult questions and even get answers most of the time. Politicians go to fancy fairs, markets, schoolparties etc. Most of them even have an email they check every day. In short we can say that politicians, that decisionmakers are very close to the public.

So, if the politicians are not the problem, what could be the problem then? I think we should have a look to our political representative system itself. Democratic politics hardly changed the last century. The other parameter, society, on the other hand, has changed a lot. One does not have to be a genius to see that in history huge changes in society were always followed by changes in the political system. The first industrial revolution at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century meant at the same time the rise of the nation state and the rise of democracy all over the continent. The second industrial revolution, at the end of the 19th century, went together with the rise of the masses in economics and in politics. It was the start of political mass movements of the common man and of the general right to vote.

It is clear to everybody that today we are living in a new kind of industrial revolution. The question is what the political answer should be? I think we can learn something from the history of the former two industrial revolutions. First of all, we hear everyday that the world is becoming more complex and more and more interconnected. That was the case in the last three centuries as well. Secondly, we notice that more and more people become more and more educated. In other words, education is more and more spread. But that too, is not a new phenomenon.

Although the world has become ever more complex and decisions more difficult, the general trend in politics has not been more authoritarianism. On the contrary, the evolution of politics was dominated by the spread of education and information. More and more people were educated and asked for more and more political involvement.

Today, this is the real gap between people and politics: people do not feel involved in our classic representative system. People have no influence. A lot of little changes to that system have been tried though: the direct election of a president, parliamentary commissions with open doors, party-newspapers, etc. Politicians do all they can, but the gap is growing anyway.

Are referenda the solution? I am not convinced. Referenda are a very distant way of involving people. They can say yes or no to a simple question about mostly a very

difficult subject. It is also a very passive way of doing politics. You watch the debates on television, while sitting in your seat or eating dinner. This is not the way politics work.

Is internet the solution? I am again not convinced. I don't believe in internet as a proper tool for debate. I hardly ever saw a decent or structured discussion on chatboxes or blackboard. This argument may sound simple but is psychologically logic: on internet one is discussing almost anonymously which makes conclusions or moderations very difficult. On the other hand, what internet is extremely good for is spreading information. Just like the telephone or the fax did not replace parliamentary debate but were used as a better form of spreading information, internet can be used as an information source for a new kind of politics.

What we need is another level of political involvement, of political responsibility, of political accountability. We do not have to bring people to the parliament, we have to bring the parliament to the people. We need grass root debates, where people can participate and where their voices count.

That is the reason why I would like to plea for a political system that is more and more decentralised. I would like to call it "Christmas tree democracy". In our modern society it must be possible to organise the political debate bottom-up. On serious issues, for example ethical questions, the debate should be started in meetings on village level. The information on which the discussing should be based can easily be provided by internet. These meetings could be held for every five thousand citizens. The meeting itself, that is normal, will consist only a percentage of this number.

After people have debated and voted on the local level, they send representatives to the next level: the provincial level of about one million inhabitants. If every community sends one representative, this provincial council will consist only two hundred members. Every representative has his point of view, voted by his community, to defend, but he will have to come to a compromise on the provincial level too. If the provincial council reaches a majority they can on their turn send two representatives to the national council, or parliament which comes to the final decision.

This Christmas tree democracy admittedly implies a heavy procedure. But is it not true as well that big decisions need big support? In any case such a kind of bottom-up democracy would introduce two "lost" principles in politics again: accountability and involvement. Representatives are forced to defend what their council decided and have to explain it afterwards if they done something else. Also, as many people as possibly interested can get involved in decision making. Christmas tree democracy would give people of the third industrial revolution what they are rightly asking for. And maybe this kind of renewal of political democracy could finally reboot the outpaced party political game and the outpaced parliamentary system, built for the society of the second industrial revolution.