

A TRAJECTORY TO REAL DEMOCRACY

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Notes:

- (1) For a record of Penny Cole's and Richard Gunn's contributions, see <http://assembliesfordemocracy.org/2015/09/15/how-assemblies-can-inspire-real-democracy/>
- (2) The diagram below – and some explanatory wording – is drawn from Richard Gunn 'Occupy Talks' Heathwood Institute and Press (www.heathwoodpress.com) 22 August 2014.

Following Penny's presentation, I raised some questions about the forms that politics might take. I imagined forms of politics arranged on line: the line starts with sharply “vertical” politics (outright dictatorship) and becomes less-and-less vertical until complete “horizontality” (Occupy-style consensual democracy) is reached. The line does not represent a chronological time-line. It merely ranges political forms or patterns in a comparative way.



A—B—C—D—E—F

Letters on the line stand for forms that politics may take:

A stands for brutal, out-and-out dictatorship – or tyranny.

B stands for *absolute monarchy* – which is top-down, although questions about “legitimacy” may be raised. A *monarch* (however “absolute”) is supposed to be different from a *tyrant* – in that a “monarch” rules in a “just” and “rightful” way. If the people *over whom a king or queen rules* disputes his or her justice or rightfulness, questions about “legitimacy” start to appear.

C stands for what political theorists term *élite democracy*. On this model, parliamentary representatives are voted into office every five or so years – and then, once citizens have elected their representatives, citizens – the people – do nothing at all. It is the representatives (and not the citizens who take political decisions. The *élite* version of democracy takes a dim view of the electorate: in the words of Joseph Schumpeter, who (writing in the 1940s) champions *élite* democracy, the individual is 'an indeterminate bundle of vague impulses loosely playing about given slogans and mistaken impressions'.

D stands for what is usually termed 'liberal democracy'. Here, representatives are elected (as in Schumpeter) – but the citizens (or in other words the electorate) are seen as having a voice. This voice is expressed in what Jürgen Habermas terms a 'public sphere' – a sphere of debate where citizens (or at least some of them) have their say. The hope is that elected rulers listen to what is said.

E stands for *participatory* democracy – where interaction amongst citizens comes into focus. Active, and interactive, citizens (and not merely their representatives) make political decisions.

F stands for democracy that is *participatory and consensual*. That is: individuals meet together (in assemblies) and seek courses of action upon which they agree. They proceed, in other words, by seeking consensus. In models **C** and **D** and **E**, democracy is present – but in the form of

majority voting (and majority rule). With **F**, the notions of *majority voting* and *majority rule* – and, with them, *competition* that results in a winners-and-losers distinction – are set aside. Democracy ceases to be *majoritarian* and takes a *consensual* form.

Having commented on my divided line, I raised some questions:

Should politics in the UK be shifted towards the “horizontal” end of my imagined spectrum?

Can politics in the UK be shifted towards the “horizontal” end of my imagined spectrum?

Is “real” democracy participatory and consensual (rather than representative and majoritarian)?

What is the relation between “real” democracy and *political parties* (actual or imagined)?

What is the relation between “real” democracy and *the state*?

In what way or ways may “grassroots” democracy exist?

Discussion – which I do not attempt to summarise here – raised a number of issues. Speaking for myself: I found the Word Power event exciting and thought-provoking in the very best sense. Democracy (it seems to me) thrives on interaction and discussion. Many thanks to all who contributed on August 23!