Introductory essay

DEMOCRACY AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN PUBLIC BODIES: NEW AGENDAS IN BRITISH GOVERNANCE

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The establishment of various commissions concerned with local governance as well as the Nolan Committee’s examination of standards in public life all point to growing public concern with the effectiveness of traditional mechanisms for holding politicians and policy makers to account. This article introduces the special issue on the democratisation of public bodies in the UK through three strands. First, it discusses theoretical conceptions of democracy and the related processes of democratisation. Second, it considers a number of recent political initiatives concerned with strengthening democratic decision making, especially at the local level. Finally, it offers a critical review of the subsequent articles in the special issue.

Introduction

Despite claims that symbolically, history ended with the collapse of communist regimes and the Berlin Wall (Fukuyama, 1992) and notwithstanding Held’s observation that “nearly everyone today professes to be a democrat” (1993, p 13), the scope for debate about and analysis of democracy remains. Indeed, it is perhaps because of the sense of political complacency embodied in Fukuyama’s cliché and because of the truth of Held’s observation that claims for and about democracy require continued scrutiny.

In the UK, issues of democracy and accountability have been at the forefront of political debate over the last few years, most notably in the face of growing public awareness and concern at the increased significance of new agencies of governance both nationally and sub-nationally. The continued proliferation of quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations (QUANGOs), extra-governmental organisations (EGOs) and non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) has been matched by the publication of a variety of extensive catalogues and analyses of this development (eg Ridley and Wilson, 1995; Plummer, 1994; Davis and Stewart, 1994; Dynes and Walker, 1995), as well as many more polemical critiques.

With regard to the former, the establishment in October 1994 of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, under the chairmanship of Lord Nolan, marked a recognition by government of widespread public concern about the standards of conduct of all holders of public office, ranging from ministers, civil servants, and MPs to the elected members and senior officers of local authorities. The first report of the Nolan Committee (Nolan Committee, 1995) stated what it saw as the set of general principles of conduct which should underpin public life. These included accountability and openness, themselves key principles in any conception of a democratic form of government, whereby the holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and submit themselves to public scrutiny in all but the rarest of cases in which the national interest demands otherwise.
This introductory article has three main aims: to provide a brief overview of the theoretical context which informs any discussion of democracy and accountability; to consider a number of recent developments in British politics of relevance to the democracy debate; and finally to offer a critical consideration of the other papers in this special issue. We end up posing more questions than we answer, but this is neither surprising nor a problem, for in posing plausible questions we can still clarify the terms of the debate about democracy and hence advance its cause.

Theoretical positions

What then are the most important defining elements of democracies, or of more rather than less democratic forms of government? As Beetham notes, democracy should properly be conceptualized as lying at one end of a spectrum, the other end of which is a system of rule where the people are totally excluded from the decision-making process and any control over it (Beetham, 1993, p 55) and hence most debates about it are really concerned with how much democracy is desirable or achievable in any given situation, rather than with the defining conceptual elements of democracy. Nevertheless, it is possible to detect some fairly fundamental differences in conceptions of democracy which arise from what Held (1993, p 15) calls a "deeply rooted conflict" between direct and representative forms. Three models of democracy stem from this conflict: direct or participatory, representative or liberal and Marxist or one-party. Each contains elements which have some bearing and significance on contemporary debates in British public life and these are discussed briefly below.

The form of direct democracy practised in ancient Athens blurred the distinction between the state and civil society through its reliance on the active involvement of all its citizens in the regulation of public affairs. As we know, the citizenry did not embrace all the population, but for the men who were included the expectation of active citizenship was taken seriously. The rise of Roman republicanism and its later application in the governance of Italian city states during the Renaissance saw a continuation of the importance placed upon public duty and civic virtue, albeit in the context of a more plural notion of the components of an active citizenry. As Held notes, there was a recognition that civic virtue was "highly fragile, subject particularly to corruption if dependent solely upon the political involvement of any one major grouping" (1993, p 17). Although this plurality referred to 'the people', the aristocracy and the monarchy, it is possible to hear echoes in current debates in the UK about ensuring that MPs, and to a lesser extent local councillors, are not drawn exclusively from a narrow social stratum but reflect to some extent the diversity of the population at large.

Liberal democracy represents a significant break with this position, not so much in the simple fact of government by representatives but in the separation of state and society and in the mechanisms by which the power of the state is held in check. But of equal significance is the notion, expressed most notably by Madison, that liberal democracy serves to moderate the intolerant, unjust and unstable behaviour characteristic of "pure democracies" (Held, 1993, p 19). Again, the degree of autonomy appropriate to societies that are sufficiently small and self-contained for more 'pure' forms of democratic government is a question of relevance to current debates about the role and purpose of local government in Britain.

Representative liberal democracy also 'solved' the problem of scale or size that had preoccupied the theorists and critics of democracy up to the nineteenth century, and allowed the emerging nation states to develop systems of government that embodied both direct accountability and political feasibility. However, while the principle of representation has clearly now been established, vigorous discussion still occurs around the more practical question of how many people it is possible for any one representative to represent, especially in view of the inevitable diversity of political preferences and positions held amongst...
the electorate of any given constituency. We return
to this later in considering the work of the Local

The third model of democracy identified by
Held is that associated with one-party states claim-
ing to draw on the analyses of Marx and Engels.
As with the previous models, the distinctiveness
and indeed the elegance of this model exists more
on paper than in the real world. The pyramidal
structure in which representatives of the smallest
scale political unit become the electorate of the next
tier of representatives of a larger scale, with all
bound by the mandate of their own electorate and
all subject to recall and replacement at any time, is
a simple formulation of this model. In practice,
the assumptions upon which the model relied – of
the primacy of class in determining an individu-
al’s view of the world and in regulating relations
between individuals – and indeed, many of the as-
sumptions about related organisational structures
have been found wanting. Nonetheless, the critique
of liberal democracy offered by Marx and others
remains valuable, especially in questioning the
assumptions of political equality among all citizens
and of the capacity of the state to rise above any
inequalities of civil society.

For Held, the conclusion of this type of analy-
sis is a recognition of the importance of “double
democratisation” or “the interdependent transfor-
mation of both state and civil society” (1993,
p 24). In practical terms, this consists mostly of
creating opportunities for people to participate
more fully in the regulation of those institutions
which make decisions affecting their lives. In the
following section we look more closely at some
examples of political initiatives which attempt to
develop and apply this principle in practice.

But before moving on to these concrete exam-
"ples, we should return to the question posed at the
beginning of this section – what are the key defin-
ing elements of democratic forms of government?
– and answer it more directly. Although Saward
claims that the definition of democracy is a politi-
cal act, he also recognises the necessity of making
such definitions so long as the assumptions on
which they are based are stated clearly and are
justified (Saward, 1994, p 7). For the sake of brev-
ity we will take the simple ‘democratic pyramid’
employed by Beetham and others in developing
indices for a democratic audit of the UK (Beetham,
1994: see Figure 1). This device provides the broad
headings under which more detailed criteria or in-
dices are developed and serves to illustrate the
inter-connectedness of the elements of any mean-
ingful conception of democracy. These elements
include: free and fair elections in which attention
is drawn to the range of offices that are subject to
popular election; the absence of coercion during
voting both through the secret ballot and in equal-
ity of treatment of candidates by the electoral
system; open and accountable government in which
accounts are rendered to parliaments, the judici-
ary and the public; civil and political rights which
are backed by law, including the right of assem-
bly, speech, association and movement; and finally,
a democratic society in which similar principles
apply, albeit to different degrees, to other social
institutions such as the press and private
companies.

Figure 1: The democratic pyramid

This simple device of the democratic audit project
again draws attention to the important notion of
degrees of democracy, in contrast to absolute
positions, which in turn is helpful in providing a framework for analysing particular arrangements, such as local government in Britain, as well as proposals for democratic improvements in the future. For example, it can be helpful in prompting questions of scale – is everyone free to stand in elections to national or local assemblies? – as well as pointing to areas that might need further development if the system as a whole is to become more democratic – what can be done to encourage more people to vote in elections?

Recent developments

While many developments in recent years have been introduced with the stated aim of giving greater voice and power to local citizens, there has been, almost paradoxically, growing concern with the state of local democracy. Three examples illustrate this concern and, to varying degrees, the paradox as well: the reorganisation of local government in England through the work of the Local Government Commission for England; the work of the Commission for Local Democracy; and the Labour Party policy document, *Renewing democracy, rebuilding communities.*

The Local Government Commission for England

The Local Government Commission for England (LGCE) was established in July 1992. It inherited the functions and duties of the former Local Government Boundary Commission, but with the additional responsibility for reviewing the structure of local government in shire England (in other words, beyond London and the other metropolitan areas). The Commission was charged by the Local Government Act of 1992 to conduct reviews at the direction of the Secretary of State and to recommend any structural, boundary or electoral changes as appear to it to be ‘desirable having regard to the need to reflect the identities and interests of local communities [and] to secure effective and convenient local government’. (LGCE, 1995a, p 25)

As the report of the LGCE observes, this was the first time that the identity and interests of local communities as well as questions of effectiveness and efficiency in service delivery were given statutory recognition in any review of local government. In considering the identity and interests of local communities, the LGCE was to address, inter alia, the issue of democracy and in this connection it received material from many existing local authorities on new ways of securing greater accountability and accessibility for their electorate and citizens.

It echoed and supported the primary responsibilities of locally elected councillors set out in previous reviews of local government carried out by Maud, Bains and the Audit Commission, including establishing local policies to meet local needs, representing individual constituents as well as communities and “creating an atmosphere which encourages...involvement in local initiatives” (LGCE, 1995a, p 47).

The question of how many councillors are needed to carry out effectively the representative role was one which the LGCE addressed directly and which goes to the heart of any attempt to make local government more democratic. The Commission noted that the ratio of councillors to residents on county councils is currently around 1 in 10,000, while on district councils it drops to 1 in 2,300, and recommended that for the new unitary authorities it should generally be around 1 in 4,000 (LGCE, 1995a, p 48). District councils have tended to view this increase in the councillor–elector ratio as a cause for concern, even going so far as to suggest it would lead to a “democratic deficit” (idem). The Commission has nevertheless persisted with this view of the appropriate ratio while recognising that new councillors will require assistance in performing their new functions effectively. It has, however, said less about the type of assistance that might help councillors perform their representative roles and responsibilities more effectively (LGCE, 1995b).

The Commission for Local Democracy

The second example is of another commission concerned with local governance in which a different set of conclusions on this issue were reached. The
Commission for Local Democracy (CLD) was launched at the end of 1993 with financial support from the public sector trades union NALGO (and later by its successor UNISON), the Unity Trust Bank and the Municipal Journal. Members of the CLD were drawn from each of the main political parties as well as from academia and the private sector and were charged with enquiring into the state of local democracy in England and Wales and considering its future. The Commission published 16 research reports over a two year period and invited representations from interested and relevant parties, all of which fed into a final report, Taking charge: the rebirth of local democracy, published in June 1995.

The Commission set itself the task of examining the opportunities for democratic participation in all forms of government activity at the sub-national or local level, in the light of what it saw as a peculiarly British postwar trait of political centralisation. Its recommendations for change to revive local democracy concentrated on the internal organisation of local government, the relationship between localities and the centre, and the nature of citizenship at the local level.

In contrast to the statutory Local Government Commission, the Commission for Local Democracy advocated a reduction in the ratio of councillors to electors, saying,

> We believe the ratio of electors to each Councillor should be brought closer to the European average, which means smaller constituencies and more elected members. (CLD, 1995, p 20)

However, this recommendation was linked a proposal to introduce the post of Mayor or Leader, elected directly and separately from an enlarged council of members whose representative obligations would be expanded at the expense of their managerial duties. These differences in representative ratios can be traced back to fundamental differences in the balance between democracy and efficient service delivery struck by each commission. As we have seen, the Local Government Commission was the first of such bodies to give significant weight to local interest considerations in addition to efficiency criteria, while the Commission for Local Democracy revealed its stance in saying

> ...the prime requirement of good government is that it is democratic, not that it be efficient. Dictatorships can be efficient, for a time. (CLD, 1995, p 3)

We can see here the dangers referred to earlier of taking too absolutist a position, whereby democracy is presented not only as a fixed state but as an aspect of government which takes precedence over others such as efficiency. Even if the logic of a tension between democracy and efficiency is accepted, the more sensible task would be to establish the most appropriate trade-off between the two rather than establish the dominance of one over the other.

Many of the other conclusions and recommendations of the CLD are more carefully argued and offer a useful list of practical measures to make local governance more democratic than it is at present. One of the more interesting is the proposal that all local authorities should have a duty to prepare an annual “democracy plan” setting out the range of measures to be taken in promoting more democratic government in their area (CLD, 1995, p 33). Just as local authorities are obliged to prepare a budget and a set of service plans, so they would also have to consider ways in which they might increase public involvement in needs assessment, priority setting, local visioning and so on. The plan might also set out measures designed to increase turnout at local elections as well as to educate the public about the functions performed by their councils and other local bodies.

The importance of educating the public about the whole range of local (as well as national) governance issues as part of any programme of democratisation has long been recognised (eg Speaker’s Commission on Citizenship, 1990). It is also worth noting the corollary that public ignorance about the processes, institutions and issues of government is likely to limit the inclination and ability of the public to engage effectively in all but the more symbolic elements of political life.
Providing more useful information and hence the opportunity for greater contemplation among those participating in democratic political processes, especially when voting or engaging in other formal expressions of preference, has been increasingly recognised of late. In this context, deliberative opinion polling is gaining in popularity both in the UK and in North America as it models “what the public would think, if it had a more adequate chance to think about the questions at issue” in contrast to more conventional polling which “models what the public thinks given how little it knows” (Fishkin, 1991, p 1).

'Renewing democracy, rebuilding communities'

Many have argued that one consequence of the growth of QUANGOs, EGOs and NDPBs has been a lack of relevant information about the priorities and policies of local public service agencies (Stewart, Greer and Hoggett, 1995; Wahlberg, Taylor and Geddes, 1995). This position also underpins the recent Labour Party policy discussion document, Renewing democracy, rebuilding communities, which links community development with notions of democratic renewal at the local level and serves as our third example (Labour Party, 1995). While it includes a somewhat predictable critique of the power of central government over local authorities, the document also proposes the introduction of “local performance programmes” (ibid, p 4) which would provide a clear benchmark against which local citizens could assess the performance of their council and take a more active part in setting standards for the future.

In keeping with some of the other initiatives described above, the Labour Party’s policy document also encourages local councils to experiment with citizens’ juries, community forums, advisory panels, public hearings and opinion polls. It is also concerned to see greater encouragement given to people from all walks of life to become and remain councillors. However, the issue remains of the relationship between the decision-making processes of councillors and these other forms of public involvement. The document does not spell out in any detail which decisions should remain the exclusive preserve of elected councillors and which should be made by an extended group of councillors and other local people. In short, the Labour Party has found it as difficult as anyone to reconcile a commitment to the primacy of elected representatives who “remain the bedrock of local democracy” (Labour Party, 1995, p 16) with a desire to involve a wider range of local residents in decisions which affect their lives.

Before turning to a critical review of the remaining articles in this issue, it is worth considering a final point about democracy and participation. While it is often assumed that greater participation in democratic decision-making processes, over and above turnout at elections, is both desirable in principle and desired in practice by those who do not at present participate, the empirical testing of this set of assumptions is less common. However, a recent Canadian study of community participation in the field of health policy planning offers interesting insights (Abelson et al, 1995). The study, carried out in six localities in the province of Ontario, examined a number of aspects of community participation: the willingness of different categories of local citizens to participate; the type of policy decisions citizens wished to be involved with; the information they felt was necessary for effective participation; and their views on who was most suited to take local health policy decisions.

The findings of this research challenge the assumption that ‘communities’ have a perceptible and unanimous interest in participating in the full range of local health policy decisions. People who consider themselves to be and are seen by others as experts, as well as those experienced in representative politics, are more likely to put themselves forward and to be seen by others as most suitable participants. Randomly selected members of the public are least likely to think of themselves as appropriate participants in any aspect of decision making. However, the strongest levels of support were for decisions to be made by a combination of groups which included elected members, experts,
randomly selected citizens and those with particular interests in health services. Once again, this points to the importance attached to heterogeneity in the composition of whichever decision-making assembly is chosen. Moreover, we can reasonably conclude that the general public's inclination to participate might be affected positively or negatively by actually doing so and is worth pursuing for this reason alone.

Critical review

The articles in this issue discuss what is meant by 'accountability' and 'democracy' and while there are differences in the way the concepts are defined, the authors share a concern with what they perceive as flaws in the way the democratic process currently operates in the UK. A common assumption is that the process is not working as it ought and they cite a range of examples of the low level or unrepresentative nature of citizen involvement. The writers share a preoccupation with process and explore questions of how participation in the democratic process might be improved both qualitatively and quantitatively. The main focus is on evaluating recent changes or initiatives and identifying areas where change is needed. In concentrating on this, they give less attention to why participation in local democracy is so limited.

Percy-Smith examines one possible method of extending democracy by examining the potential of the 'information superhighway' to contribute to a political culture which is both more open and has a higher degree of participation. She explores how new information and communication technologies (ICTs) might counter the effects of the size and complexity of contemporary society. At its simplest, she suggests this might consist of electronic referenda but, without structured prior discussion, voters are likely to participate as individuals without any deep understanding of the 'common good'. ICTs have a more straightforward contribution to make to increased accountability by making public records more accessible for, as she rightly points out, access to information is a necessary though not sufficient condition for most methods of increasing democratic participation. The problem is that it would be difficult to devise a system of tele-voting which would allow not only for the provision of information and easy voting but would allow for the negotiation and debate which Fishkin (1991) says ought to underpin democratic decision making. It runs the risk that it represents democracy of an ill-informed but widely represented electorate -- arguably no better than the current arrangements where few are informed and few vote.

We are left with the questions of how information and some reassurance of an informed electorate can be brought into the practice of democratic politics, and what democracy means without it. More fundamentally, perhaps, while ICTs have the potential to increase participation and to make available the information on which informed choice can be based, they cannot make people interested and cannot in themselves make people participate or indeed ensure that they understand political processes. In practice, we are a long way from large-scale use of ICTs in the democratic process and a great deal more development work would be needed to set the systems in place. Working out how to encourage people to use them is a further stage.

Stewart's solution is to give democracy "renewed meaning" so that participation has a greater role than simply selecting periodically who will govern. The crucial element he claims is, again, information and he argues for a representative democracy based on the active process of deliberation. He describes a number of initiatives aimed at "seeking the informed view": citizens' juries, deliberative opinion polls, consensus conferences and standing citizens' panels all involve encouraging citizens to discuss and come to a decision based on having access to more or rather better quality information. Precise details are inevitably limited and there are few examples, but all the initiatives seem to be based on the assumption that given the right information, citizens can and will make better informed decisions.
Citizens’ juries have mainly been used to feed into local decisions, but judgements about whether resulting decisions were qualitatively better, and how the procedure was viewed by both the electorate and the elected, have not been made. Nor are we told how significant bias in the presentation of evidence is avoided. Additionally, the process appears to be based on the assumption that given balanced evidence, individuals will make the ‘right’ decision; there is no information on how the procedure is protected against self-interest of individuals, failure to comprehend or failure to listen to evidence. There are echoes here of the idea of ‘epistemic democracy’ in which it is assumed that there exists a ‘correct’ answer to any particular political problem and that democratic decision making is the best way of revealing it (Miller, 1993). Again, there is an implicit assumption that people have the community’s best interests at heart.

Consensus conferencing makes an attempt to involve lay people in technical decisions, but has the same inherent weaknesses as citizens’ juries with the added bias that members are selected from those who respond to an advertisement – a procedure hard to square with the democratic process, however defined. Standing citizens’ panels aim to place a statistically representative body alongside an electorally representative body to act as a consultative mechanism for the elected representatives. It is not difficult to see how the body could be made to mirror class, gender and race, for example, but how would it deal with minority and politically extreme views and how could it guard against decisions that were ultra vires or simply unacceptable to the majority?

It is easy to accept the assertion that democracy is qualitatively improved if it is based on informed and involved decision making and the illustrations of how this might be achieved at the local level suggest citizen involvement in local issues might be increased. However, this is acknowledged to be the area where citizens are already involved; it is by no means clear that the initiatives proposed take us much further towards a more fully involved democracy.

Stewart asserts that people will only participate when they have power and when their participation counts, yet it is unclear in any of the initiatives described by either Stewart or Percy-Smith precisely how we ensure that participation counts. Questions about who sets the agenda, who formulates the questions, the scope of the exercise and the status of the outcome are all crucial. There is a risk of setting up systems which are no more democratic than the ones they replace; the initiatives described provide a means, but leave unanswered the questions of how far involvement goes, who should decide and how conflicts should be resolved.

Wall, too, discusses the problems created by the ill-informed consumer and there are parallels with discussions of the ‘informed citizen’ in other articles in this issue. The problem of unequal knowledge between professional and patient in the health service is part of the same problem as that of the citizen who lacks sufficient knowledge to make an informed judgement about policy. The difference is that, in the former case, the consumer has a vested and personal interest in a very direct sense. But even in this case, true accountability is hampered by the level of consumer knowledge. This serves as an example of how far it is realistic for the citizen to hold to account and Wall recognises this by noting the ‘frailty’ of accountability. In some senses, the individual needs to be ‘protected’ against the flaws and imbalances inherent in the provider/user relationship but the key question to be addressed is surely how realistic are expectations of a fully involved citizenry and what are the realistic limits of involvement? Much of the discussion avoids these issues. Notions of ‘common good’ are raised, but this again begs the questions of who knows best and whose interpretation of the common good is most important?

Another issue which deserves more serious consideration is this: which units of interest should be represented and in what sense they should be represented? A number of writers discuss representation of community and of local interest almost as if there is no room for discussion of any other
focus. Geographical mobility and the dislocation between home and area of work, for example, surely break down the significance of locale, and the influence of other factors must be worth exploring. Discussions about devolution to local levels and evaluation of experiments on very localised devolution – such as is seen in Tower Hamlets – must surely be informed by a more sophisticated analysis of the factors at work. The notion of tele-voting can undermine the concept of geographical community altogether. Cairns discusses community at some length and notes that a local political constituency typically covers more than one geographical community. This may be so, but to concentrate on the importance of locality is to overlook the role of other, probably equally important influences. What, for example, is the role of class, occupation or ethnicity?

Wall alone acknowledges that involvement might not be equal in practice or in principle across society. Whether or not we agree with him that nomination might produce better results than election, it is refreshing to see raised the question of whether the educated middle classes are always best able to assume positions of authority. It is a legitimate area for study and can be extended beyond a discussion of class. Discussion of unequal participation and unbalanced representation cannot be avoided because we fear accusations of elitism; they will not go away because we do not analyse them and, as long as we avoid analysing them, there will be a gap in the debate. If we are to further the debate about democracy we need to better understand why people do or do not participate and on what terms.

Stewart does, in passing, acknowledge the need to involve communities of interest as well as of place, but the complex question of how this could be achieved and the many difficult issues it raises are not fully discussed. He acknowledges, but does not address the problem of meeting different interests and values and simply devolves to elected representatives who will be better informed by the deliberations of citizens. This seems to sidestep the real issues of where power lies. He notes the tendency for citizens to be involved in issues of direct concern to them, but does not explain how they would then engage in broader policy formulation and debate: it is the difference between being actively involved in opposition to the closure of a local school and being forced to make decisions about where unavoidable cuts will fall across the budget as a whole. The discussion assumes people want to be involved in these sorts of decisions; the evidence suggests the citizen’s concerns are more parochial. Perhaps before we go further we should take time to ask citizens what they want and to properly evaluate the experiments which have already taken place.

Questions about the representation of different interest groups are also raised in Taylor’s discussion of the role of the voluntary section in relation to democracy. Given the diversity in both function, size, sophistication and role within the sector, there are problems in drawing general conclusions. But there is clearly a place for further exploring questions about who voluntary sector organisations speak for and how far they represent the public at large. In their role as watchdog they may often speak for a particular sector of society or interest group and, in some senses, the more effective they are in acting as spokesperson for those they represent, the less democratic they become. In effectively representing the interests of a particular minority group they risk creating new elites which fall far short of a democratic model. It is a strength and indeed an aim of many voluntary sector organisations to either provide for or speak for (or both) groups which traditionally have little or no voice in the democratic process. At the micro-level they encourage involvement in the decision-making process via management committees and user representation, but it is arguable that this simply distorts, rather than promotes the democratic process.

Rather than worrying about how far management committees represent their user community, or are dominated by factions or class(es), perhaps we should be exploring the bigger and more complex questions of who they represent and
what role they play in the democratic and political process. How do they contribute to and shape public debate, and how far do they influence policy and service provision? If they are effective, who are the losers? Are they examples of grass roots representation or simply an example of the politics of self-interest at work? Whatever the answer to these questions might be, is there a case for moving beyond the cosy notion of well-meaning ‘do-gooders’ and asking hard questions about the role of voluntary organisations in influencing the policy process?

Quite apart from the problems of considering how the diverse concerns of different interest groups might be adequately and fairly integrated, there are questions of how such a system of democratic representation might mesh with political representation. Surprisingly, this is not addressed in any of the papers in any depth. Is the assumption that the one system excludes the other or that they can coexist as now, but in a more equal partnership? The nature of party politics at the local level is different in important ways, but local elections do have a clear political dimension which deserves serious discussion.

There are inevitable tensions between the more direct democratic representation which derives from an involved and participative citizenry and the more remote form of an elected representation where we delegate decision-making powers. Many of the discussions described in the articles in this issue make assumptions that the latter form is superior to the former, but we are prompted to question this. Cairns argues that successive local government reorganisations have emphasised functional requirements at the expense of democratic purpose and that centralism has undermined local democracy. He asks why there is little sign of large-scale resistance to loss of local democracy.

This question is posed in a number of forms by various contributors. Why do people not value democracy more highly (however defined)? Why don’t they participate and why do so few exercise even their most basic democratic right to vote, particularly in local elections? The question is framed and reframed and numerous examples of the failure of local democracy are cited, but the question is never adequately answered. Cairns looks to structures and processes for an explanation, but ignores the individual. We know that electoral turnout at local elections in the UK is low at 40% — much lower than national elections at 70% or in local elections elsewhere in the European Union — and we interpret this as a failure to engage in local democracy. The explanations tend to assume that a rejection of involvement in the local political process is based on informed judgement, yet such evidence as there is suggests that many of the local electorate have at best only a hazy understanding of how their local representatives are elected and what their powers and duties are (see Hughes, 1994, for an account of voter indifference in the USA). The functions of the various tiers of local government are poorly understood and are often not distinguished from those of central government. This blurring of function is encouraged by the political rhetoric which surrounds local elections.

Perhaps alongside our concern about how structures and processes facilitate local participation, we should explore the knowledge, understanding and attitudes which underlie people’s voting behaviour and their understanding of the operation of local government. We can then move on to ask, ‘Does it matter that people don’t vote/aren’t interested in local politics and if it does matter, why, and what can be done about it?’ Much of the analysis starts from the unstated assumption that people ought to participate. If it does matter, then we need to understand it better or attempts to change the status quo are likely to fail.

Such evidence as is quoted typically looks at satisfaction with services and notes that this does not translate into public support for the institution of local government. This is hardly surprising. The research tools for exploring satisfaction with a clearly defined service like refuse disposal or council housing are relatively straightforward. Far harder, surely, to explore the complex area of the public’s understanding of the concept of democracy.
or collective responsibility in the context of local government. If we are to complete the picture we must address some of these hard questions, using sophisticated methods.

For Cairns, the subordination of democratic to functional needs in local government is a problem, yet he does not explain why this is so, or explore, to any extent, why the local electorate appears largely content with this. One could argue how far this emphasis on function represents a shift over time, but an alternative explanation might be that, having voted at national level, the individual is quite happy to leave implementation at local level to paid officials, so long as they offer some degree of local accountability. At least part of the answer must lie in the attitudes and understanding of the individual. Indeed they might prefer to vest power in professional politicians – we simply don’t know, because we haven’t asked the right questions. Behaviour may just be reflecting a view that it is local accountability rather than participation in local decision making that is important to individuals.

Conclusion
Should this discussion of democracy and accountability in theory and practice leave us feeling optimistic or pessimistic? Is the state of democracy in the UK, especially at the local level, really a cause for great concern? What can be done to make our decision-making processes and arenas more democratic?

While there is sometimes a peculiar combination of complacency and fatalism about discussions of politics in the UK, such that we are happy to fall back on clichéd claims to have invented parliamentary democracy and to see little scope for improving on it, there is nonetheless room for optimism. The simple fact that democratic renewal is on the agenda of so many different bodies bodes well, as does the growing recognition that democracy and efficiency do not always have to be incompatible. Perhaps the burden of proof should lie with those who claim incompatibility to demonstrate more precisely the ways in which efficiency could be increased through the suspension of certain democratic ways of working.

The state of democracy in the UK also requires careful scrutiny before we pass judgement and the work of the team conducting the Democratic Audit of the UK represents a major step in the right direction. It is encouraging that the rise of QUANGOs, EGOs and NDPBs has provoked such interest in questions of openness, accountability and probity in local institutions and that the Nolan Committee looks set to keep the spotlight on national institutions as well. Moreover, it is encouraging that attention is also being paid to exploring how local government can provide greater opportunities for participation in politics, to learn of the choices facing local politicians and call for accounts of local action.

Finally, we can draw conclusions about what might be done in the future. While it is important to discuss, as we have done above, the theoretical underpinnings of democracy and democratisation, it is equally important to encourage and learn from action and experimentation. As action research so often demonstrates, it is through trying something in practice that the most effective testing can take place. In this way we might learn what Crossman called “the secret of British politics”:

the difference between myth and reality, and also between the dignified and the efficient exercise of power. (Crossman, introduction to Bagehot, 1963, p 2)

Note
The authors are writing in their personal capacities.

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