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democracy

colin miller & gabriel chanan



www.deeperdemocracy.org.uk

Preface

Universal suffrage is little more than a hundred years old – a blink in the eye of history. A conviction of the need to embed democracy more deeply in our societies, and shared experience of analysing community development, is the common ground for the respective authors in producing these two complementary papers. Our partly different perceptions of the issue suggested the need to include some divergence of approach. Rather than attempt a complete resolution of these differences, which might blur rather than illuminate the issue, we thought the dilemmas could be captured better by adopting the form of a proposition followed by a response.

Labour's 2017 election manifesto offered 'a commitment to extend democracy, locally, regionally and nationally', and spoke of 'devolving power to local communities so they have more power to shape things such as their city centres'. These commitments raise many questions:

- What do the commitments mean in practice?
- How would they be implemented?
- Does community development have a particular role to play in bringing them about?
- What have been the results of past attempts to do similar things?
- What dilemmas do they present, and how could they be tackled?

These commitments could be the beginnings of a more devolved democracy. But are they enough to answer why many people lack confidence in the current political and electoral system?

Our contention is that government will fail to achieve greater social justice and equality unless it also deepens our democratic system, incorporating participative and deliberative methods into the way decisions are planned and made at a local, regional and national level.

These papers are aimed at policy makers, activists, those already engaged in extending and enriching democracy and our friends in the community development world.

Our discussion is far from conclusive but we hope that it takes the debate a few steps nearer to lasting changes. The first paper, 'Towards Deeper Democracy – A Proposition', by Colin Miller, explores the background, what we mean by deep democracy, with some real world examples and an outline of how it might be made to work. The second paper 'Towards Deeper Democracy – A Response', by Gabriel Chanan argues that new methods of local participation cannot achieve lasting change without a better understanding of the role of centralised state action as well.

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Towards Deeper Democracy – A Proposition

Colin Miller

Introduction

Surveys have consistently shown that the most disadvantaged in our society are the least likely to be politically involved or to vote.¹ These surveys also show that many feel they have little or no power or voice over what happens to them or their communities. Consequently many see little point in getting involved in political activity.

It could be argued that this was why the otherwise empty Brexit slogan ‘take back control’ resonated with many people. The slogan felt deeply personal to a substantial percentage of the leave voters because they feel that they do not have a say in what happens to them, their communities and their country.

It is a feeling that is rooted in the real lived experience of many thousands of UK citizens. As the horrific tragedy of Grenfell Tower Block all too starkly shows, despite the fact that the residents were active and organised through a well-informed Tenants Association, they were dismissed as the ‘usual suspects’ and their concerns about the fire safety of their homes was consistently ignored. If they had been listened to perhaps over 80 horrific deaths would have been averted.

Being ignored is the lived experience of thousands of residents across the country.

The core argument of this paper is that the fact that large numbers of our citizens feel they have little or no power should be of central concern to progressives, not only because we need the votes of those who refuse to vote, but because:

‘high levels of lack of engagement are indicative of wider social inequality, where politics is seen as an elite activity... [where] certain groups, among them the economically disadvantaged, face pronounced difficulties in mobilising in order to exercise power²

In short the struggle to create a deeper democracy is indivisible from the progressive aim of creating a more equal and sustainable society.

The struggle for democratic reform has long been a central feature of progressive politics, but in recent years this has tended to focus on the campaign for proportional representation (PR). Whilst PR would be welcome, it is not a solution that is accepted by all progressives. In any case it is unlikely that the introduction of PR would have much impact on the many who feel they have no power or say over decisions directly affecting the lives of their families and their communities.

¹ Joel Blackwell & Ruth Fox, 'Audit of Political Engagement 14' (Annual Report, Hansard Society, 2017).

² Electoral Reform Society Scotland, 'Democracy Max: An Inquiry into the Future of Scottish Democracy' (Enquiry, Electoral Reform Society, 2013).

There is a slowly growing consensus on the need to develop a deeper democracy, a form of democracy that incorporates participative and deliberative methods into our political systems. A number of progressive politicians have argued the case for community/citizen empowerment, and some key organisations such as the Electoral Reform Society and the Joseph Rowntree Trust have undertaken extensive work on the current state of our political system and options for radical change.

There have been many experiments and more permanent projects across the world that have injected participative and deliberative methods into decision-making processes. Some, such as participative budgeting in Porto Allegre in Brazil, and the various projects concerned with constitutional reform in Canada, Iceland and Ireland, are well known. There is also a growing number of towns and cities such as Seattle, Barcelona and Madrid along with the 'flat pack democracy' experiment in Frome and the growth of the cooperative council movement in the UK that have begun to devolve power and decision making into local neighbourhoods and communities³.

Whilst the literature and research exploring options and possibilities for the creation of a deeper democracy is extensive, it has tended to focus on examining the effectiveness of deliberative systems (such as the citizens' juries) in dealing with regional or national issues, such as constitutional reform or the development of effective mental health polices (USA).

Any initiative seeking to involve citizens in discussing important issues and developing proposals at a regional and national level is to be welcomed but the core argument of this paper is that a reforming progressive government must first and foremost focus on neighbourhoods as the foundation for creating a deeper democracy.

For the majority of people neighbourhoods are where the lived experience of power (or the lack of it) is to be found. Neighbourhoods are where the changes in power relationships are at their most tangible and where the majority are most likely to want to be involved. It is also where the foundations for a deeper democracy have already been laid as many thousands of citizens are involved in running a myriad of community organisations with the explicit 'political' aim making their neighbourhoods and communities better places to live and to grow.

Resident led community partnerships, which bring community organisations together with other services, exist in many places and could form the mechanism upon which a deeper democracy can begin to be built.

Building a deeper democracy from the neighbourhood up requires fundamental changes in the way local government and other services plan and make decisions. And those involved need to be skilled in community practice and supported by community development practitioners.

The creation of a deeper democracy is about changing the relationship between the citizen and the state. It is based on the principle that citizens have the right to be involved in the planning and decision-making processes of local, regional and national governance. But the process will not be easy. Creating a democratic system incorporating participative and deliberative systems and structures faces some

³ These councils include Edinburgh, Greenwich, Liverpool, Croydon, Norwich, Rochdale, Newcastle and Southampton

challenging questions, particularly regarding the precise relationship between our existing, representative system, and the new participative systems. It is an issue that has constantly dogged many of the experiments in participative processes and must be addressed if we are to develop a successful national strategy.

These and other questions require a much deeper and more wide-ranging conversation between those of us who seek a deeper democracy, but they are not intractable. We can learn a great deal from each other's experience and ideas. We can also learn from the experience of the last Labour government which, perhaps more than any other, systematically sought to develop more effective and inclusive planning and decision making systems within communities, local government and public services.

There is a growing interest in developing a deeper democracy but the conversation is somewhat fragmented. Although this paper advocates a particular model of how a deeper democracy might function, there are other models. There are also many large and small groups and individuals engaged in thinking about and campaigning for radical constitutional and democratic reform. Much of this activity seems to be fragmented and it is unclear if there are any deep conversations taking place between these organisations on how a deeper democracy could be developed and how it might work in practice.

We need to share our ideas and develop strategies. We also need to have a much deeper impact on the thinking of the progressive political parties and organisations.

Compass believes that the good society must be based on the three core elements of equality, sustainability and democracy. We hope, through the good offices of Compass, that we can work with others to develop clear ideas and proposals on how we can achieve the aim of making society more democratic than it now is.

Why we need change

Our democratic and political systems need to be deepened for the following reasons:

- there are high levels of political discontent and alienation from our existing system that potentially threaten its long term health
- a long wave of constitutional and structural reform in the UK resulting in the radical devolution of power to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland
- despite the beginnings of regional forms of governance in England the nation remains highly centralised, with local government increasingly stripped of its powers and budgets
- an urgent need to develop a more inclusive response to address issues connected with community safety, health, education, housing and environmental issues
- the potential radical social, economic and organisational changes that are predicated to take place in the wake of the 'third industrial revolution' - a revolution that is already taking place and which is likely to have a profound impact in the medium and longer term

But most importantly it is about ***the vision that lies at the heart of progressive values: simply that the creation of a good society can only be achieved through the creation of a deeper, richer democracy.***

Political discontent

It could be argued that discontent and alienation from our political system had reached a nadir in 2009 as we experienced the aftermath of the MPs' expenses scandal. Unsurprisingly during this time the Hansard Audit on Political Engagement found that 'voters were deeply disgruntled and disengaged'.⁴ Things had not much improved in 2013: whilst 73% of those surveyed agreed that Parliament was 'essential to democracy', only 30% said they were satisfied with the way Parliament works, six points lower than in 2004.

The percentage of people feeling unhappy with the way Parliament works remains high. The 2017 Hansard Audit found that only 29% of those interviewed felt that Parliament was doing a good job in representing their interests, and over 70% believed that our present system of governance needed to be improved.⁵

Whilst the turnout for general elections has improved in recent years, local elections continue to be abysmal with an average of 30%.

There is also a marked regional and class divide on voting turnout in the UK. The national turnout for the 2017 general election was 68.7% of registered voters; the highest was Winchester at 79.8% whilst the lowest number recorded was 51.9% (Wolverhampton South East).

The 2017 Hansard Audit identifies some important information on the views of the pro-Leave and pro-Remain referendum voters. Approximately 60% of Leave voters did not vote in the 2015 general election. But both Leave and Remain voters are doubtful of having political influence. About 70% of Leave voters do not believe they have any political influence, and many Remain voters share this scepticism with only 33% believing they have any political influence.⁶

This helps explain why the otherwise empty pro-Leave slogan 'take back control' had so much resonance with many of the pro-leave voters. The slogan had meaning because it represented something far deeper than the supposed recovery of parliamentary sovereignty. It articulated the lived experience of many people who feel they have no control or say over what happens to them or their communities.

The need to develop an inclusive response

This paper argues that the struggle for a more equal and sustainable society and the demand for a more democratic society are essentially two sides of the same coin. Progressives seek more equality of income, access to housing, the law, equality for disabled people, on issues of sexuality, race and so on. We also believe in the right to equal access to high quality health and wellbeing, community safety, education and the environment.

Central to much of this is the right to equality of power, of influence, of voice and community.

Events in 2017 have shown in graphic terms the consequences of communities being denied the right to equality of power and influence.

⁴ ERSS (2013)

⁵ Blackwell & Fox (2017).

⁶ Blackwell & Fox (2017).

In the immediate aftermath of the terror attacks in 2017 there was a lot of debate on the impact of budget cuts resulting in the loss of approximately 20,000 police officers. Some senior officers argued that this loss meant that it was no longer possible for the police to undertake 'community policing'. Consequently they were less well informed as they were unable to gather local intelligence about what is going on in communities and neighbourhoods.

Whilst this is true it is an extremely limited view of how community policing (or more accurately community safety) operates in communities. In practice effective community safety and policing is based on the development of strong partnerships between the police, residents and other public services. The best are community led, with the police and other services working with residents.

In 2017 we witnessed an extreme example of the horrific effect when a community is ignored. The Grenfell tower block fire raises many important questions but one key factor stands out: despite having an active and well supported tenants' association, the local authority and the tenants management organisation (TMO) chose to ignore the numerous complaints and expressions of concern on fire safety issues coming from the TA and individual tenants.

This tragedy epitomises the experience of many thousands of residents living in the poorest neighbourhoods across the country. The irony is that many have argued that the key to helping communities is through the creation of strong 'social capital' such as social networks and community organisations⁷. However it is clear that Grenfell did not lack social capital, but on its own this was not enough. Despite being organised the community was ignored. Real empowerment is the combination of strong social capital with power.

Unsurprisingly if citizens feel they have no power or say over what is happening to them they will tend to see little point in engaging politically. ERS Scotland argues that citizens failing to engage politically can have negative consequences on their communities because a lack of engagement means that citizens may not develop the necessary skills for self-organisation:

'Participation takes practice... To be re-engaged, you have to have been engaged at some point in the past, and there are large groups of people who are not engaged at all and never have been. The voices that aren't heard are usually the most disadvantaged and it's not that they've chosen not to use their democratic muscle, they don't actually have any... If opportunities are limited then people do not get to exercise the skills and habits required in a truly democratic society. Without civic exercise they fail to 'grow democratic muscle'. Negative experiences or deliberate exclusion by those in power means already disadvantaged groups are even less likely to develop these skills and the confidence to use them'.⁸

⁷ The networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively

⁸ Electoral Reform Society Scotland, 'Democracy Max: An Inquiry into the Future of Scottish Democracy' (Enquiry, Electoral Reform Society, 2013).

Structural Changes

Constitutional change and development in the UK is a slow, piecemeal and contradictory process. For example whilst forms of proportional representation (PR) are already widespread in the UK, its introduction into parliamentary elections is strongly opposed by the Tories and sections of Labour. There has been a radical devolution of powers in three of the four nations that comprise the UK, but the same has not happened in England where:

“It is hard to find any democratic country where there is less territorial dispersal of political power...[and] the consequences of devolution not being introduced to England means that over 80% of the UK population has no significant tier of government between it and the Westminster/Whitehall core.”⁹

Whilst the development of the devolved regional authorities such as the Greater Manchester Combined Authority may mean that this issue is finally being addressed, unfortunately an exciting opportunity to develop new forms of democratic planning and decision-making in the new authority was missed. Lisa Nandy MP commented that the new authority was:

“cooked up by a group of men behind closed doors...the region’s people have been shown complete contempt”¹⁰

Whilst the new regions are being developed local government is being gutted. Over the last 10 years much of their traditional powers have been stripped away along with many of the services they traditionally delivered. A kind of double defenestration is taking place with powers being removed and budgets slashed.

Challenges in the longer term

If economists such as Paul Mason¹¹ and Jeremy Rifkin¹² are right we are already experiencing the effects of a third industrial revolution which is creating profound long-term pressures for the radical decentralisation of our society, and this will have a profound impact on our social, economic and political systems.

Mason and Rifkin predict that changes in the means of production, which Rifkin describes as the ‘internet of things’ (3d printing, renewable energy production, the collaborative commons etc), will have a radical impact on the mode of production, for example the way the economy and businesses are organised. Such changes will encourage a fundamental devolution of economic, social and political power. They argue that we are already witnessing the beginning of this in many aspects of life, including our political and social organisations, for example in the way elections are fought and campaigns are organised.¹³

⁹ Andrew Blick, 'Unlock Democracy: Devolution in England a New Approach', in *The Federal Trust for Education & Research* < www.fedtrust.co.uk > [accessed 14 December 2014]

¹⁰ Colin Miller, 'The Question of EVEL: a Review of Literature and Opinion' (Briefing, Compass, 2015).

¹¹ Paul Mason, *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (London: Allen Lane, 2015).

¹² Jeremy Rifkin, *The Zero Marginal Cost Society: The Internet of Things* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). Jeremy Rifkin, *The Zero Marginal Cost Society: The Internet of Things* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

¹³ See Rifkin discussing the issues of zero marginal costs and the collaborative commons here, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUHWssPRPA8>

It would be wise to avoid being carried away by the broad sweep of Mason's and Rifkin's arguments and predictions, but there can be little doubt that we are facing a period of long-term deep and potentially profound change. Progressives need to understand the process that is taking place and develop ideas on how the changes might help us create a more equal, sustainable and democratic society.

Deep democracy and progressive politics

The struggle for democracy is written into the DNA of progressive politics and has been a central feature of our politics, pretty much from the Levellers onwards. The calls for democracy are a universal demand and around the world people continue to be imprisoned, tortured and to lose their lives in the struggle.

There has always been something of a pull between centralised and decentralised forms of decision making within the progressive movement. This tension was already evident in the first 'progressive alliance' as socialist groups, trade unions, the cooperative movement and radical dissenting churches coalesced to form the Labour movement and Labour Party. In his seminal study of the German Social Democrats the early sociologist Roberto Michels argued that the pull towards centralisation of power and decision-making was inevitable, dubbing it 'the iron law of oligarchy'.¹⁴

Progressive and left wing parties continue to struggle with the challenge. But alongside the creation of centralised party structures there has always been strong interest in creating decentralised and participative forms of society and organisations such as workers' and consumers' cooperatives, clubs, societies and youth organisations.

The post-war model of social democracy with its emphasis on state planning and the provision of key services such as health and social security dominated much of progressive thinking throughout the fifties and sixties. As the 'New Left' emerged in the later 50's and early 60's, much of its narrative was concerned with reconnecting with ideas about how we can develop a more decentralised form of social democracy and socialism. At the same time historians such as EP Thompson and Christopher Hill began to explore the deep historical democratic current that has always been a part of British radical politics.

The development of a radical new vision focussing on the creation of a fundamentally more participative kind of society also became a central motif within the kaleidoscope of radical ideas that emerged from the 'counter culture' of the sixties and seventies. Many of that generation of young leftists were interested in exploring how deep democracy might be developed in practice. The movement blossomed in all sorts of ways, particularly with the re-emergence of collectives and workers' cooperatives, some of which survive and thrive today.

At the same time many radicals became interested in working with communities. Taking their inspiration from the work and ideas of Saul Alinsky, Paulo Freire and Antonio Gramsci, they believed that this approach would provide the opportunity to radicalise marginalised groups and communities providing the skills, knowledge and

14. Roberto Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* ([n.p]: The Classics, 2013).

self-confidence to self-organise and make their own political, social and economic demands.

Many initiatives were established, such as law and advice centres and community resource centres. It was during this period that community development and community organising emerged as key elements in the growing movement for radical community-based politics.

The long-term impact of the likes of Alinsky, Freire and Gramsci and the community politics of this period should not be underestimated.

Commentators such as Neal Lawson from Compass argue that *'21st-century socialism will be participatory'*, whilst Hilary Wainwright, editor of the magazine Red Pepper, has pointed out that:

'The sources of power necessary for radical transformation are more plural and complex than simply 'winning government for the left''¹⁵

The ideas of community based radicalism have played a seminal role in the development of parties such as the Greens and Podemos and many other radical organisations.¹⁶ These and others have sought to create decentralised organisations based on collaborative thinking, planning and decision-making, although as they have begun to take centre stage they have struggled to reconcile their commitment to decentralisation with the demands of running an effective organisation capable of responding to the demands of national politics.¹⁷

The influx of thousands of new and mostly young members to the Labour Party, coupled with the development of groups such as Momentum over the last couple of years now appear to be encouraging the beginning of a significant cultural and organisational change in the party.¹⁸

'He [Jeremy Corbyn] has understood the appetite, especially of the young, for a genuinely collaborative, participatory kind of politics that invests in the common good and values active citizenship'¹⁹

Part of the success of the party's 2017 election campaign has been attributed to the adoption of techniques based on community organising that were originally developed by the likes of Saul Alinsky to help mobilise and empower poor and marginalised communities in Chicago.

Proposals for change

In recent years interest in democratic reform has tended to emphasise the importance of PR as a way of addressing some of the key inconsistencies of our current electoral system.

¹⁵ Hilary Wainwright, 'New Model Activism', *Red Pepper*, Oct/Nov 2017.

¹⁶ Inigo Errejon, *Podemos: in the Name of the People* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2016).

¹⁷ <http://socialistreview.org.uk/402/challenges-podemos>

¹⁸ The Labour Party now has 800,000 members and has become the biggest social democratic party in Europe.

¹⁹ Yvonne Roberts, 'Corbyn Read the Public Mood and the Appetite For Change ', *Observer*, 11 June 2017.

The argument for PR is a powerful one. If a proportional voting system had been in place in the 2017 election progressive parties would have dominated Westminster. Non-nationalist progressive parties would have gained approximately 317 seats, whilst the right would have had only 298 seats (Tories, DUP and UKIP etc.),²⁰ providing the progressives with a majority of 19 seats².

Whilst we agree that the current system should to be replaced by one that is fairer and more democratic, on its own PR is unlikely to address many of the key issues discussed in this paper. Peter Kyle, Labour MP for Hove and Portslade who opposes PR, argues that: *'we need a deeper and more radical change required that seeks to develop a more extensive and inclusive form of democracy that actively involves people in the decision making process'*²¹.

It is a call that is shared by a number of leading Labour politicians, For example Steve Reed MP for Croydon North, who played an important role in the development of cooperative council idea believes that:

*" we need a real devolution - people getting the chance to influence decisions that affect them, and making the professionals who run those services listen more carefully to the people they serve. We believe in devolution by default. That means a new approach that assumes powers will be devolved unless there is a compelling reason not to. We want to see resources devolved alongside powers, with fiscal devolution that ensures funding follows need. And we want devolution to mean something more than a transfer of power from one set of politicians to another – communities need a new right to request control."*²²

John Tricket MP, currently Shadow Minister for the Cabinet Office has said that any future Labour-led constitutional assembly must consider the incorporation of new forms of decision making such as participation and deliberation.

In 2015 Compass published *'Finding Our Voice: Making the 21st Century State'*, a collection of essays by a group of progressive politicians, academics, writers and others to explore how the state should function in the new century, including how we might extend and enrich our democratic systems.²³

The contributors represented a broad strand of progressive thinking but:

"What is interesting, as the span of authors makes clear, is that an emerging common position on the state bridges the traditional left and right divisions within Labour. The assembled authors would not agree on every item of policy, but their shared ground suggests that more than anything they trust people to shape the state,

²⁰ The breakdown by party is estimated to be: Conservatives 276 seats (as opposed to an actual 317), Labour 261 (262), Lib Dems 45 (12) UKIP 12 (0), Greens 11 (1), SNP 20 (35).

21. Conversation with Peter Kyle, 30 May 2017

22. Steve Reed, 'It's Time to Loosen Central Control and Let Communities Take Charge', *Guardian*, 26 April 2016.

²³ The book brought together an impressive group, including MP's, people involved in local government and public services, academics, political commentators and others (including the authors of this paper). Labour MPs included Jon Cruddas, John Healey, Liz Kendall, Lisa Nandy, Chi Onwurah, Steve Reed, Keir Starmer, Jon Tricket, and Hilary Wainright (editor Red Pepper)

*not consult them as an afterthought or a nice-to-have addition, but handing control over to people is essential to the redesign of the state. It is the people who must help the people – the state is a vehicle through which that can happen.*²⁴

There is some evidence that these ideas are beginning to have an impact on Labour Party policy. The 2015 and 2017 election manifestos contained a number of commitments to constitutional change and to devolving power. The 2017 manifesto included the following:²⁵

- abolishing the House of Lords and creating an elected second chamber
- a commitment to 'extend democracy, locally, regionally and nationally'
- devolving power to local communities so they have more power to shape things such as their city centres
- organising a constitutional convention that will 'invite recommendations on extending democracy'²⁶

Manifesto commitments tend to lack specificity, but it would have been interesting to see what would have happened if the Party had won. For example what would the commitment to 'devolving power to local communities so they have more power to shape things such as their city centres' mean in practice? And whilst it is certainly true that local government must be given more powers and freedom to shape local policies to meet local need, surely 'extending democracy' must be about more than simply giving more powers to a council!

The commitment to organising a constitutional convention is potentially deeply important as it would be wide-ranging and seek to extend '*democracy locally, regionally and nationally, considering the option of a more federalised country.*'²⁷

Interest in extending and enriching democracy has been growing in the party for several years. As leader of the Labour Party Ed Miliband talked about the need to extend democracy in his 2014 Hugo Young memorial lecture. Referring to the likes of Saul Alinsky he talked about the need for a future Labour government to develop new ways of delivering public services, that we needed to move away from an over centralised 'top down' approach, not towards the Tory model of market based individualism, but rather to create a 'people powered' public sector.

Miliband argued that inequalities of power and access to information, and the ability to make decisions, must become a core concern for progressives, sitting alongside such issues as income and wealth.

During much of the Miliband leadership, ideas about the need to empower communities and public service users was explored by Jon Cruddas, Steve Reed and others including the emergence of the cooperative councils movement²⁸

²⁴ Compass, *Finding Our Voice: Making the 21st Century State*, ed. by Gabriel Chanan & Neal Lawson (London: Compass, 2015).

²⁵ Labour Party, 'Labour Party Manifesto', in *Labourparty.org.uk* <www.labour.org.uk/index.php/manifesto2017> [accessed 2 August 2017]

²⁶ It is worth noting that many of these ideas had already formed an important part of the 2015 Labour manifesto when Ed Miliband led the party.

²⁷ Fionnuala Ni Mhuilleoir Chris Caden, 'The 2017 Election Manifestos and the Constitution', in *Constitution Unit* <[HYPERLINK "www.constitution-unit.com" www.constitution-unit.com](http://www.constitution-unit.com)> [accessed 5 October 2017]

Community action is political action

A key weakness of much of the literature concerned with democratic issues is the tendency to view political activity and decision-making rather narrowly.

Commentators tend to equate 'political engagement' with traditional activities such as voting, involvement in political parties, signing petitions, writing to MPs or going on a demonstration. Activities such as community activism and engagement rarely if ever seem to be taken into account. But we would argue that this kind of activity is a form of political activity because it is about people seeking, through a myriad of ways, to make their communities good places to live.

Lazy politicians and journalists often accuse those who don't vote or engage in conventional political activity of being 'apathetic'. In saying this they make two great errors. Firstly, by viewing political activity through their own very narrow paradigm they miss a vast range of social activity that is, by any other name, 'political'. Secondly they seem uninterested in identifying why there are so many apparently apathetic citizens in the first place. They do not seem to realise that a decision not to 'engage' in political activity can be a considered political position!

The accusation of apathy implies that those who are not engaged in politics are not interested in trying to improve the world around them. This is patronising nonsense. Whilst many people may not see the point in being politically engaged in the conventional sense, this does not mean that they are not engaged in other ways, for example in activities directly aimed at making life in their communities better. Of course many 'non-engagers' will be uninterested in engaging in community, but this is also likely to be true of the political 'engagers'. It is impossible to say if the 'non-engagers' are less likely than the 'engagers' to be involved with their communities. What we do know is that there is a vast number of people who are involved in all sorts of ways in their community.

The National Council of Voluntary Organisations estimates that there are over 165,000 voluntary sector groups in the UK. Of these, more than 60% (about 99,000) consist of small groups, and many of these are based in neighbourhoods and communities.

The organisation also estimates that annually 14.2 million people are involved in some form of voluntary activity. This covers a huge range of activities. About 50% of volunteers are involved in sport and exercise groups, 34% in faith groups, 33% in children's education and schools and 19% (that is about 2.6 million) in local community groups. It is worth noting that only 6% (858,000) are engaged in political activity.²⁹

It is here that the foundation for a deeper democracy is already being grounded in the struggle for equality in planning and decision making and in what happens in communities, in terms of improved community safety, education, health, wellbeing and access to the services that people need.

²⁸ ed Steve Reed & Kitty Ussher, 'Towards Co-operative Councils: empowering people to change their lives' (Policy).

²⁹ National Council Voluntary Organisations, 'UK Society Civil Almanac' (web, NCVO).
<https://data.ncvo.org.uk>

Whilst many communities are rich in the kind of 'social capital' described here (networks of community groups supported by an active group of residents), it is a mixed picture. There are many neighbourhoods that do not have lots of groups, where a small band of hardworking activists struggle to improve things. There is a case to be made that high '*levels of lack of engagement are indicative of wider social inequality, where politics is seen as an elite activity*'³⁰

From this perspective it is clear that the demand for a deeper democracy is not additional, but central, to the progressive struggle for social justice and equality.

Deeper democracy in practice

It makes sense to seek to build a deeper democracy in the neighbourhood, but it must not end there. A progressive government will need to develop a systemic approach that encourages participative planning and decision making vertically, as we move up the layers of government, and horizontally, between communities.

Such a systemic approach has never been tried, but there are many examples of long and short-term initiatives and experiments that provide a sense of what could work and be developed³¹.

There is an impressive richness and variety in the existing examples. Some, particularly neighbourhood and town and city based initiatives, are very long-standing. There have also been a number of important regional and national initiatives focussing on important regional and national issues.

Here are some examples of democratic initiatives from the UK and other parts of the world.

Neighbourhood and community based participation and deliberation

DueEast Neighbourhood Council, Brighton

DueEast Neighbourhood Council is a resident led organisation representing the Whitehawk, Manor Farm and Bristol Estates in the East of the City of Brighton and Hove. In 2012, Brighton and Hove City Council (at the time led by the Greens) identified this area as one of two pilot Neighbourhood Governance projects.

From 2012 community development practitioners worked with residents, community groups, businesses and public services in the 3 neighbourhoods to help them determine their priority issues, create an action plan and a suitable structure that would work for each area.

³⁰ Electoral Reform Society Scotland, 'Democracy Max: An Inquiry into the Future of Scottish Democracy' (Enquiry, Electoral Reform Society, 2013).

³¹ Much of the literature concerned with participative and deliberative forms of democratic decision-making focuses on particular levels of governance and approaches (for example the use of citizen juries at regional or national level). But the approaches explored in the literature are simply tools, each with strengths and weaknesses. The aim must be to create a structure of governance where participative and deliberative decision-making becomes incorporated as the norm at all levels of governance.

In 2014 the DueEast Neighbourhood Council was constituted as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation. The council has 10 resident trustees, but membership of the organisation consists of all adult residents (about 10,000 people).

The aim of the Neighbourhood Council is to act as a strategic, resident led, umbrella organisation for the area, to provide a voice for local people in major decisions about the area and to bring together local community organisations and public services (police, health, education, housing etc.) to take joint action. The Council acts as a facilitator and animateur for community led and owned solutions on such issues as health and wellbeing, housing, education, and community safety.

The Neighbourhood Council holds 4 public meetings a year and organises themed sub-groups that bring together residents, community groups and service providers to deliver on the specific items identified in the community action plan.

DueEast also organises an annual participative budgeting process to enable local groups to bid for funds. Decisions on the successful bids are made by residents through a face to face and online voting process.

The community council has had a number of important successes including lobbying for improved primary care provision in the area, the production of a community newsletter delivered to 4,000 households and a large scale annual community festival

Skilled community development workers provided support to the residents, members of the community council and its sub-groups, encouraging and supporting public service and local authority involvement, and many of the community groups and other initiatives.

Townstal Community Partnership³²

Townstal, in Dartmouth, is a social housing estate of about 4,000 people. The estate is isolated from the main town where most services are located. Compared with the main town, the estate suffers from extensive disadvantage in terms of health, income, education and children in need.

The Townstal Community Partnership (TCP) was set up as a resident-led, multi-agency partnership in July 2009. The aim of the partnership is to give residents a direct voice to public agencies and the local authority. The work plan of the partnership is decided at local open 'listening events', where residents identify issues, develop possible solutions and agree priorities.

Before the partnership was set up local people were angry about the high levels of neglect on their estate, but as residents and services began to work together this anger has turned to optimism with a dramatic rise in the number of residents becoming actively involved in community activities.

³² Steve Griffiths, 'A Can-Do Community Partnership: Townstal key residents and services talk about Townstal Community Partnership' (Case Study, Health Empowerment Leverage Project, 2013).

Since 2009 the partnership has achieved a number of important breakthroughs:

- local children were involved in plans for the redevelopment of the only open, but derelict, green space on the estate
- the creation of a community centre/community hub
- getting health and other services to operate on a regular basis in the area
- reducing the local crime rate
- improving traffic conditions.

The key to the success of the partnership is the way that residents and services work together. Residents set local priorities and the role of the partnership is to co-productively implement them³³.

Like DueEast, TCP would not have existed without the initial and continued support of skilled community practitioners who played a key role in working with residents and services to get the partnership off the ground and then providing day-to-day support to the residents and local services.

There are or were many similar examples of successful partnerships dotted around the country but the numbers are diminishing as councils find it increasingly difficult to provide financial and professional support. For example there are 14 neighbourhood partnerships in Bristol, but the council recently announced:

'Because of significant financial pressures, we can't continue with the same level of support we've been giving to the Neighbourhood Partnerships and their Neighbourhood Forums. We need to reduce the Neighbourhood Partnership budget by about half in 2017, and remove it altogether by 31 March 2019'

Many partnerships and related initiatives were established during the last Labour government and are part of an ever-shrinking legacy of that government's long term commitment to supporting communities.

Successful partnerships tend to share a number of factors:

- they are actively supported by the residents
- residents have a lead voice and role
- key issues and priorities are identified through open, participative and deliberative processes
- they are based on co-productive principles, where residents, services and local politicians work together as equals on issues and strategies
- the partnerships are actively supported by key decision makers and resource holders (elected politicians and senior managers) within the local authority and public services.

³³ "<http://educationnext.org/nobel-prize-winner-elinor-ostrom-and-her-theory-of-co-production/>" [Elinor Ostrom](#) and colleagues at the University of Indiana originally developed the concept of co-production in the late 1970s. The approach seeks to fundamentally alter the relationship between service providers and citizens/service users. The approach emphasises people as active agents, not passive beneficiaries. In contrast with traditional resident/citizen involvement, citizens are not only consulted, but are part of the [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coproduction_\(public_services\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coproduction_(public_services))

- local government practitioners and their line/operational managers have a strong commitment to the partnerships and an understanding of how to work effectively with residents
- the partnerships were established and then supported by skilled community practitioners/community development staff who work with residents, as well as those politicians and council staff who work directly with the community.

A major challenge facing these partnerships is that they are often isolated from other initiatives; they may even be the only one in a particular town or city. Such partnerships do not have formal powers and are entirely dependent upon the goodwill of the local authority and others in terms of their survival, of being heard and having influence. Whilst the partnerships may have a profound impact on the neighbourhoods where they are based they do not necessarily make a marked impact on local authority policy.

Towns and cities

Some towns and cities have taken ideas about participation and neighbourhood empowerment a step further and developed long term strategic programmes.

Frome Council and Flatpack Democracy

All 17 councillors are independent of political parties. They call themselves the 'Independents from Frome' (IfF). The group argue that party politics has no place in a town council because political parties are more concerned with point scoring and that such tribalism prevents open listening, dialogue and collaboration. The current system is effectively a form of 'gatekeeping' that discourages public participation in local decision-making processes. When the IfF was elected it spent time working on how they would work together as a group.

The ruling group developed its ideas on how to develop a devolved and inclusive system from a variety of sources including the radical and highly participative Spanish group Podemos and more recently the Danish Alternative Party.³⁴

When IfF took power it immediately changed the way council meetings were organised. Committed to narrowing the gap between local citizens and local politics and levelling a perceived hierarchy, they changed the language used in council minutes, documents and agendas; they also opened up all agenda items for public comment. They now hold some council meetings 'in the round' with members of the public.

The council has a key concept that everyone in Frome shares responsibility for resolving issues and taking things forward, '*You can't come to a meeting and demand 'what are you going to do about some problem or other', but rather what can we do together about the problem.*'

Frome council organises regular public meetings around the open deliberation model developed by Podemos. These meetings are open but include experts on the issue. To avoid domination by a chair representing the

³⁴ Peter MacFadyen, 'The Truth about Independence', "www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnfAhmEE_E8&t=1181s"

council, skilled independent facilitators run the meeting. There is a commitment that whenever possible the council will adopt and implement the recommendation made at the meetings.

The council is also committed to planning and agreeing its budget through a participative budgeting process, " *which means that locally elected councillors encourage and enable other local people to decide what the Council spends its money on. We make no apology to those who believe that councillors are elected to make decisions and they don't need to work with the rest of the community to do so*".

Seattle - USA

The city of Seattle has a population of 735,000. The City Council started to develop a comprehensive strategy community involvement and engagement in 1988 when it set up the Department of Neighborhoods. The strategy emerged after a long period of acrimonious relationships between neighbourhoods and the city council during the 1980s when a number of elected officials got together with a group of 'neighbourhood leaders' to try and develop a more collaborative model of governance. The idea was that the community, rather than the council, should be involved in establishing local priorities.

Since then Seattle has developed a comprehensive but constantly evolving model that supports working partnerships between residents and the city council. The strategy has several 7 core elements:

- **Little City Halls:** The council operates decentralized one-stop offices in neighbourhood that are based in local shopping areas or branch libraries. Residents can do business across multiple council departments and even with other layers of government. The Department of Neighborhoods also employs liaison workers who help neighbourhood groups to access the city council and vice versa.
- **Neighborhood Matching Fund:** A grant programme to support neighbourhood improvements, community organising or planning projects that are initiated by residents. The community matches the grants through contributions in cash, in-kind professional services and volunteering. More than 5000 community groups have been developed through this programme.
- **Neighborhood Planning Programme:** during the late 1990's, 37 communities were provided with money to hire independent planners who are accountable to the community for developing neighbourhood plans to add to the City's Comprehensive Plan. The planning process engaged approximately 30,000 residents across all sectors of the community.
 - Described as 'holistic planning', the community:
 - developed the plan's vision and recommendations
 - initiated the planning process
 - defined its own planning area based on residents' own perception of the area rather than via predetermined, often artificial, boundaries
 - defined the scope of the work and what is important. The planning process can covered economic

development, public safety, recreation, transport, affordable housing and other issues

- **You Voice, Your Choice participatory budgeting process:** residents decide how to spend a portion of council's budget (\$2m) on small-scale improvements to street and parks.
- **Engage Seattle:** a commitment to advance inclusive engagement across the city, via outreach work (all departments and elected officials). The program is guided by a Community Involvement Commission and includes Public Outreach and Engagement Liaisons for historically underrepresented communities.
- **Neighborhood Accountability Sessions:** Each mayor has taken their own approach, but generally each administration has conducted regular neighbourhood walking tours and town hall meetings so that the mayor and department heads can maintain a neighbourhood focus and respond to local concerns.
- **People's Academy for Community Engagement:** provides leadership development and skills building for 'emerging community leaders'. Develops skills in community building and organising, inclusive engagement and accessing government.

Individual mayors have also developed individual initiatives to engage residents, particularly on financial issues. For example convening an Education Summit process. Thirty local meeting involving more than 3000 residents met to discuss the City's role with schools. The process resulted in a levy that funded before and after school programmes, free school clinics, family support workers and other measures to help students feel "safe, healthy and ready to learn." Another mayor worked with neighbourhood planning leaders to develop funding measures around the priority recommendations that emerged from the neighbourhood plans. Residents voted overwhelmingly to tax themselves an additional \$464 million for 27 new and enlarged libraries, 13 new and enlarged community centres, and more than 100 new and improved parks.

Nationwide initiatives

Cooperative councils - nationwide

The cooperative council movement began in about 2012 when Lambeth Council developed a new model and structure. The aim was to create a more open and inclusive council structure to encourage residents and services to work together.

There are now more than 20 large and small councils who belong to the Cooperative Councils Innovation Network. They include Glasgow, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Sunderland, Oldham, Rochdale, Sandwell and the London Boroughs of Croydon and Greenwich.

The network states that cooperative councils are committed to developing '*a new role for local authorities that replaces traditional models of top down governance...with local leadership, genuine co-operation, and a new*

approach built on...the co-operative movement: collective action, co-operation, empowerment and enterprise’.

Co-production is an important feature of the model:

‘The principle of cooperation between service provider and user is central to this approach and it implies a relationship of equal power and mutual respect...it requires a reshaping of the relationship between citizens and state so the citizen is in control’³⁵

Whilst these councils share similar values, there does not appear to be a standard model of how cooperative councils function, although they hold some strategies in common including:

- developing ‘community asset management’ such as housing cooperatives
- encouraging the development of community based social enterprises such neighbourhood based renewable energy cooperatives, where profits can be reinvested in the community
- bringing services together at a local level and encouraging greater community control through various forms of neighbourhood ownership
- neighbourhood fora
- youth and play services that are controlled by young people and communities
- community based participative budgeting.

it may well be that the cooperative council model could play an important role in informing a future Labour government’s local government reform strategy. But before doing so it would be wise to undertake a ‘whole system’ research project that examines a selection of cooperative councils to identify what works and why and what does not work and why not, from the perspective of residents, councillors, council officers and other key stakeholders.

National debates and policies

Whilst there are plentiful examples of attempts at creating a richer and more inclusive form of democracy at the local level, examples of similar attempts at a regional and national level are scarcer.

GM nation?

In 2013, following public hostility to the introduction of genetically modified (GM) foods and crops in Britain, the government advisory body the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission (AEBBC) persuaded the then government of the need for a widespread public debate on the issue. The organisation went on to organise, *‘an unprecedented experiment in public participation...an attempt to generate widespread interest and considered discussion about complex matters of science and policy amongst relatively large numbers of the lay public’³⁶*

³⁵ Steve Reed and Kitty Ussher, 'Towards Co-operative Councils: empowering people to change their lives' (Policy).

³⁶ Graham Smith, 'Beyond the Ballot: 57 Democratic Innovations from Around the World, ' (Review, Power inquiry/Joseph Rowntree Trust, 2005).

The AEBC argued that a credible public debate needed to be independent of government, but also carefully structured and facilitated. Due to a lack of funds the organisation was not able to include as wide a range of participatory and deliberative approaches as originally hoped but enough resources were provided to develop a process consisting of:

- nine country wide foundation workshops that identified a series of questions for the broader debate. Each workshop involved 18-20 participants and two facilitators. Eight workshops consisted of members of the public representing different stages of life and two broad socio-economic groups. A ninth workshop involved participants already 'actively involved' in GM issues
- approximately 675 regional and local community open meetings.
- 10 closed focus groups involving a total of 77 citizens (chosen to represent different stages of life and socio-economic groups) that provided more structured analysis of issues and acted as a control to compare with the results of the local meetings

Background material and the questionnaires were made available by post and Internet for citizens unable to attend local meetings. The website received over 2.9 million hits and 24,609 unique visitors, 60% of whom submitted feedback forms.

In total 36,557 feedback forms were returned and analysed.

It was clear from these debates, deliberations and returned questionnaires that there was considerable unease about GM with little public support for the early commercialisation of GM crops in the UK.

In March 2004 the government gave a rather guarded response to the GM Nation? Report on the debate. Ever perceptive, the government acknowledged that *'people are generally uneasy about GM crops and food, and there is little support for early commercialisation of GM crops in this country'*.

A Conversation About Mental Health - USA

In 2013 President Obama launched a 'national conversation' on mental health in order to develop a multi-strategy programme to help inform his 'Affordable Care Act' (Obamacare). The process included nationwide discussions and deliberation via 'town hall' and other local meetings. Many of these meetings employed a structured deliberative approach. The workshops were facilitated by a coalition of organisations – Creating Community Solutions - with an interest in employing participative techniques with large groups. An estimated 57,000 + people, including those with lived experience of mental health issues, mental health providers and young people participated in the deliberative exercises.³⁷

Constitutional change

³⁷ Tom Campbell, Raquel Goodrich, et al, 'Promoting Inclusion, Equity and Deliberation in a National Dialogue on Mental Health', *Journal of Public Deliberation*, 12 (2016).
<http://www.publicdeliberation.net/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1446&context=jpd>

A number of countries and large regions, including Scotland (1989-95), Iceland (2010-2012), British Columbia (2005-2007), and Ireland (2012-2014), have undertaken deliberative exercises to consider changes in their national or regional constitutions. Several employed a form of 'citizens jury' that seeks to encourage a highly deliberative and structured process.

The Citizens' Jury

*'Citizens' juries have developed as a form of participatory research that seeks to legitimise non-expert knowledge... The uniqueness of Citizens' Juries lies in involving citizens in developing their knowledge of a specific policy area, asking questions of expert witnesses, collective group discussions and deliberation and reaching a final decision. Citizens' Juries are often used alongside other research and public consultation tools such as surveys, interviews and focus groups and are intended to complement other forms of consultation rather than replace them.'*³⁸

1. The "jury" is made up of people who are usually randomly selected from a local or national population. The selection process is open to outside scrutiny.
2. The jurors cross-question expert "witnesses" —to provide different perspectives on the topic — and collectively produce a summary of their conclusions, typically in a short report.
3. The whole process is supervised by an oversight or advisory panel composed of a range of people with relevant knowledge and a possible interest in the outcome. They take no direct part in facilitating the citizens' jury. Members of this group subsequently decide whether to respond to, or act on, elements of this report³⁹

Table 1: Citizens' Juries

1989 – 1995: Scottish Constitutional Convention⁴⁰

Described as a 'civil society convention' the convention involved a wide range of civil society organisations such as the Scottish TUC, regional, district and island councils, women's groups and faith groups as well as a number of political parties. Although the SNP did not participate, as it was not in the convention's remit to discuss independence, the Conservatives also boycotted the process as they opposed the development of a Scottish Parliament.

The proposals were included in the 1997 white paper 'Scotland's Parliament'.

2010 – 2012: Iceland

Iceland established a Constitutional Assembly to develop proposals for a new constitution in the wake of the worldwide financial/banking crises that had hit the country particularly badly. Part of the process included a national forum involving 950 citizens who were randomly selected from the National Population Register. There was also a wide public debate organised along conventional means as well as extensive use of social media.

The draft constitution was accepted by the Althing (the Icelandic parliament) and a national referendum then voted in favour of proposals.

³⁸ Scottish Health Council, 'Patient & Public Participation - Citizens Juries', in *Scottish Health Council* "www.scottishhealthcouncil.org"

³⁹ 'Citizens Juries', in *Wikipedia* < en.wikipedia.org > [accessed 16 August 2017]

⁴⁰ Colin Miller, 'The Question of EVEL: a Review of Literature and Opinion' (Briefing, Compass, 2015).

Strengths

- the process had widespread public support.
- the effective use to of social media ensured a wide range of people participated

Weaknesses

- Iceland has a small population (319,000) compared with UK's 50 million
- the new constitution was not adopted because it had effectively excluded the politicians from the process, giving them "*carte blanche to block the process at a later date [so] strong citizens' support came to nothing*"

2005 – 2007: Canada, British Columbia & Ontario

A new constitution was developed by a citizens assembly consisting of 160 members who were invited to participate from a random sample taken from the electoral rolls. The sample was stratified to ensure proportional representation, by gender, age and ethnicity. Members met at weekends to learn about the options, canvas views, deliberate and make proposals.

The BC assembly sat for 11 months and took evidence at 50 public hearings attended by over 3,000 people, it also received 1,600 written submissions.

2012 – 2014: Ireland

This process shared similarities with the Canadian model but with mixed assemblies. Two-thirds of the membership were randomly selected from the electoral role, and a third nominated by politicians.

The Assembly was asked to consider eight topics arising from lack of agreement between the parties of the governing coalition.

A number of issues immediately stand out from these examples. The work of the assemblies have met with mixed success. Sometimes their proposals have been accepted, but at other times they were rejected or ignored by the government.

There have been a number of interesting proposals to incorporate participative and deliberative systems into national policy-making and governance. These include a suggestion that a system of parallel citizens' juries could be developed to work alongside parliamentary committees. Another suggestion is that the House of Lords could be replaced with a kind of giant citizens' jury where members of the second chamber are chosen randomly from the electoral register for a fixed period.⁴¹

Whilst these examples, along with many others, provide valuable information, insights and practical lessons on how a deeper democracy could be developed it would be wrong to ignore the work of the last Labour government.

⁴¹ Diarmid Wier, 'Random Selection for the Lords', in *Future Economics* < www.futureeconomics.org > [accessed 2 August 2017]

The last Labour government: communities, partnerships and some empowerment

Throughout Labour's 13 years in power the government focussed on neighbourhoods in greatest need. It was a long-term programme that focussed on a number of themes:

- encouraging partnership working between public, voluntary sector organisations and community groups at a local and town/city wide level
- a requirement that residents should be involved and consulted over the development of local initiatives
- involving residents and other key stakeholders in the creation of neighbourhood plans
- a requirement that residents be included in the governance of flagship community projects such as the New Deal for Communities and the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund

The programme culminated in two landmark policy papers, the 2006 *Local Government white paper*, and the 2008 *Communities in Control white paper*.

Sadly the justified anger surrounding the Blair government's decision to support of the Iraq war has tended to blind many to the government's positive work in supporting communities and to some extent empowering neighbourhoods and developing systems to encourage partnership working.

The Labour government's flagship community-based programmes were ambitious. They included the New Deal for Communities (NDC) and the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF).

NDC was a £2bn programme aimed at transforming 39 of the most deprived neighbourhoods in England. Each area received about an average of £50m over 10 years

NDC had six key objectives:⁴²

1. to transform the areas through 'holistic change' in relation to crime, community and housing and the physical environment along with three 'people-related outcomes', education, health, and overcoming worklessness
2. to 'close the gaps' between the 39 poorest areas and the rest of the country
3. to achieve a value for money transformation of these neighbourhoods
4. to emphasise partnership working with other agencies such as the police, health services, schools, and the local authority
5. that the community would be 'at the heart' of the initiative
6. to sustain local impact after NDC Programme funding ceased.

A further programme, the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund was launched in 2000, this programme was aimed at the 88 most deprived local authority areas not already benefitting from the NDC.

⁴² Elaine Batty: etal, 'The New Deal for Communities Experience: A final assessment' (Evaluation, HMG, Communities & Local Government, 2010).

The governance of the NDC programmes included resident board members arrangements whilst governance of the NRF projects was less prescribed. In practice the relationships between the community and others generally worked well, but at the same time relationships between residents and other key stakeholders could be challenging. On one or two occasions this led to a complete breakdown between the community representatives and the public sector/local authority within the management structure of the programmes.⁴³

It is not hard to see why. The NDC and NRF programmes brought together complex sets of relationships between organisations and individuals at local, town/city, regional and national levels. Expectations and understandings, ideas on priorities, how the money could or could not be used, and the way forward had to be constantly negotiated and clarified. There were often underlying and sometimes overt questions, tensions and disagreements on issues of accountability and power. Where did accountability lie, should it be with the local residents, the programme management board, the local authority, the government department?

Within this melange inexperienced community activists and representatives were often left trying to make sense of complex and sometimes contradictory demands. It is important to remember that whilst these activists were unpaid volunteers, most of the other project partners were paid professionals who were supported by their employing organisations.

When things did go wrong it was often because residents became angry because they felt they were being ignored or patronised and that that the declarations of a commitment to community control/accountability were window-dressing.

The more successful NDC's and NRF projects were able to negotiate around these tricky questions, and clarify important questions such as accountability (for example by electing community representatives onto the management boards).

They also recognised that residents required skilled professional community development support to help them participate in the governance of the programmes and to develop and manage the new community based projects that were to emerging from the programmes.

Whilst special funding was focussed on a relatively small number of communities, the Government (as a continuing strategy throughout the Labour period), promoted community based partnerships and neighbourhood planning on a wide scale that affected virtually every local authority and parish council.

The second arm of the government's strategy was the creation of the Local Strategic Partnerships. The aim was to bring public, voluntary and community sector groups together at a strategic level to jointly develop and implement local plans, share and allocate resources, undertake problem solving and develop collaborative projects. Again some LSPs were more successful than others. Tensions would sometimes develop, with accusations that key decisions were being stitched up behind closed doors and not involving all the partners. There were also questions relating to power or the lack of it of where community groups and smaller organisations complained of being crowded out by bigger and better resourced organisations.

⁴³ Batty et al 2010

In parallel the government encouraged key public services, such as the police, to develop a stronger relationship with communities through regular neighbourhood meetings. At the beginning the police and others often lacked experience in working with communities in this way. So they tended to organise meetings in a conventional way with rows of chairs for the public with the police facing the audience. From the perspective of the police as well as the general public, these meetings could be frustrating and unproductive. It was hard to encourage creative problem solving and the meetings were easily dominated by one or two people with particular axes to grind.

Even so many officers were committed to finding more effective ways of working with the public. With practice and by working with others, they were able to develop the necessary skills and insights that enabled them to work with residents in a more participative way.

In 2006 the government published *'Strong and Prosperous communities: the local government white paper'*⁴⁴ followed by the White Paper *'Communities in Control: real people, real power'* in 2008.⁴⁵ The intention behind the white papers was to incorporate much of the learning gained from previous government initiatives and propose a practical way forward. Sadly the white papers turned out to be the apotheosis of the government's long-term community strategy as the financial crash engulfed the government shortly after the second white paper was published.

The Communities white paper stated that it aimed *'to pass power into the hands of local communities. We want to generate vibrant local democracy in every part of the country, and to give real control over local decisions and services to a wider pool of active citizens'*

The paper outlined a series of proposals on how this aim was to be achieved but recognised that public servants and elected officials required support and training to enable them to work more effectively with communities. So it outlined a commitment to the creation of a training programme for 'relevant public sector officials' to help them develop community practice and empowerment skills.⁴⁶

From the moment the Tories took power in 2010, they began to dismantle these local initiatives, to be replaced – they argued – with what turned out to be the risible 'Big Society' that died an almost immediate death. In the process of creating the 'big society', the government withdrew funding from virtually all the national organisations that had provided advice, information, training and acted as a collective voice for community practitioners, community groups and others. Organisations that had been providing these services for many years, such as the Community Development Foundation, Community Matters, the Urban Forum and Community Development Exchange disappeared.

⁴⁴ Department of Communities and Local Government, 'Strong and Prosperous Communities: the Local Government White Paper' (White Paper, HMG, DCLG, 2006).

⁴⁵ Department of Communities & Local Government, 'Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power' (White Paper, HMG, CLG, 2008)

⁴⁶ Gabriel Chanan and Colin Miller, 'Empowerment Skills for All: Analysing gaps and constructing a learning framework' (Policy Report, Homes & Communities Agency, Homes & Communities Academy), p. 64.

Despite this some neighbourhood partnerships (such as Townstal) have managed to continue to survive and thrive, but many have failed.

There are all sorts of reasons why the partnerships failed but it was particularly because some local authorities no longer funded professional support and provided grant aid.

Other factors include:

- a failure to properly link what was happening locally in the partnerships with the decision making process of the local authority and other services.
- original public sector champions of the partnership moving on to other jobs or made redundant.

Issues and lessons

It could be argued that the Labour government did not significantly deepen local democracy, but it did encourage a number of important structural reforms, and helped change professional and organisational cultures in local government and other public organisations.

The case studies described above vary in scope, size and ambition; but they share a common starting point. Each emphasises the need for effective community led partnerships that employs co-production, participation and deliberation.

The relationship between residents and local authorities can encourage the development of a virtuous circle, one that directly counters the statement that: *'The voices that aren't heard are usually the most disadvantaged and its not that they've chosen not to use their democratic muscle, they don't actually have any, and they have no expectation of being asked to participate, and that is itself a challenge'*⁴⁷

A form of democratic praxis not only has a positive impact on residents but also on the other partners such as public service practitioners, managers and elected politicians. All develop participative and deliberative 'democratic muscle'.

This is key because, as those involved in the Cooperative Council movement recognise, this way of working makes particular demands on public servants and politicians. To work in a participative way requires politicians and professional to make a paradigm shift in assumptions acquired through professional training, organisational cultures and top down, command and control structures.

The role of community practice

This paper has frequently referred to the importance of community practice, particularly community development, to the success of the case studies. What is community practice? It is:

'the ways in which staff of public services, or those involved in voluntary organisations or other local initiatives, reach out to support local residents, by working together to improve conditions and to help them gain greater control over the

⁴⁷ ERSS (2013)

*forces that control their lives...not as passive consumers of services but as active collaborators*⁴⁸

For the creation of a deeper democracy that is rooted in neighbourhoods with its emphasis on the importance of empowering communities through participative decision-making and collective action, community development is particularly important. It is:

*"a way of strengthening civil society by prioritising the actions of communities, and their perspectives in the development of social, economic and environmental policy. It seeks the empowerment of local communities...It plays a crucial role in supporting active democratic life by promoting the autonomous voice of disadvantaged and vulnerable communities".*⁴⁹

It is an approach that focuses on the dual goals of 'product' and 'process':⁵⁰

Product goals include:

- helping build a strong network of collective action and engagement through the creation of community led organisations and projects
- developing more accountable local public services that better meet the needs of the community.

Process goals include:

- developing collective skills, knowledge, self confidence and experience in individuals and collectively, to enable communities to plan, make decisions and to make demands of and work with local authorities, large organisations and others.

It is important to point out that there is an equally wide body of CD praxis with 'communities of identity', including refugees and asylum seekers, people with disabilities, the LGBT communities and faith groups.

Community development and progressive politics

Community practice and community development is rooted in the politics and ideas that emerged from the radical community movements of the 1960s and 70s (see above) and was deeply inspired by the ideas of Paolo Freire, Antonio Gramsci and Saul Alinsky. Over time other key movements such as feminism, black liberation and the LGBT movement helped further enrich CD praxis.⁵¹

Community Development and Government Support

Since the Tory-led coalition government came into power in 2010, there has been a systematic dismemberment of CD at a local and national level in England. Whilst CD

⁴⁸ Gabriel Chanan and Colin Miller, *Rethinking Community Practice: Developing Transformative Neighbourhoods* (Bristol : Policy Press, 2013).

⁴⁹ Scottish Community Development Centre, 'Developing Community Influence', in *SCDC* < [HYPERLINK "www.scdc.org.uk/what-is-community-development"](http://www.scdc.org.uk/what-is-community-development) www.scdc.org.uk/what-is-community-development > [accessed 27 July 2017]

⁵⁰ Alan Twelvetrees, *Community Work*, 4th edn (Basingstoke & London : Palgrave Macmillan & Community Development Foundation, 2008).

⁵¹ Margaret Ledwith, *Community Development: A Critical Approach*, 2nd edn (Bristol: Policy Press, 2011).

continues to be supported by a number of local authorities and other organisations in England, it is a shadow of what it once was⁵². This local decimation has been accompanied by the closure of the national infrastructure of organisations that provided advice and training, represented practitioners and promoted best practice.

It is not so much open hostility as a wilful indifference that has continued during the May administration.

Consequently those who are left of the CD world must feel there is little room for optimism as they struggle to undertake their work against increasing odds. But there is ground for optimism as an increasing number of progressives share many of the core CD commitments of empowering communities and creating a participative democratic system. Given this, it is critically important that we find ways of working together. Each needs the support, knowledge experience and enthusiasm of the other:

*'Progressives have a lot to learn from CD, but we have a lot to learn about what other, non-CD people are doing and thinking. We need to get involved because of the role we could and should play in helping a future progressive government develop a strategy for the extension and enrichment of our democratic systems and policies affecting communities and neighbourhood.'*⁵³

Why initiatives fail or succeed

Deepening democracy 'from the bottom up' will be a difficult and challenge project. But any progressive government seeking to do this will be in the fortunate position of learning from and building on what has already been done.

Whilst it is important that we understand how and why some empowerment initiatives have been successful it is equally important to understand why others have failed, despite apparent political and organisational support, and even community development support.

There are a number of key factors why neighbourhood initiatives fail.

- isolated one off experiments that had no connection with similar projects and a shallow relationship with the local authority
- decisions made by the partnerships were ignored or rescinded
- council officers involved in the partnerships received no support and had little or no autonomy.

It is hardly surprising that after initial enthusiasm these initiatives tend to fade away as participants feel there was little point in being involved and simply walk away.

The examples of Seattle and the Cooperative Councils demonstrate that a city or town wide strategy is more likely to succeed if it is built systemically. Recognition that simply 'tacking on' some neighbourhood based process onto an unchanging system and structure is likely to fail. Successful strategies require systematic structural and cultural changes within the local authority and other services and the provision of

⁵² Although it continues to be well supported in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

⁵³ Colin Miller, Third Sector Research Centre, 'Looking to the Future: Community Work in England' (Conference, University of Birmingham, 2016).

adequate support systems including access to funding, information and skilled community practice support and a clear agreement and understanding of competencies and accountability amongst all stakeholders.

The next level

Whilst the development of a deeper democracy must be rooted within neighbourhoods, we need to face the question of how we can then expand participatory practice at a strategic level, one that involves a large section or the whole of a town or city. Questions such as issues around traffic, big regeneration programmes, environmental issues can affect many neighbourhoods and can be extremely contentious.

Our case studies provide an indication of how this might be done, as Frome and the co-operative councils have begun to develop a structural approach to incorporating participative approaches to developing and implementing council policy (for example running the youth and play services). Porto Allegre is a well known example of how residents can be involved in discussing difficult and contentious issues relating to the spending priorities of a local authority.

There are also examples of developing very large scale deliberative initiatives aimed at creating detailed plans for regeneration. Possibly one of the biggest exercises of its kind was the 1980s 'People's Plan for the Royal Docks' that was produced as an alternative to the Thatcher government proposals for the docklands. The plans covered a vast area of the Thames riverfront between Tower Bridge and Beckton.

The creation of the alternative plan was an example of co-production on big scale. It involved hundreds of residents and community organisations, large and small businesses, five local authorities and academics experts from local universities who provided information and expertise, on planning, highways, economics, business and housing⁵⁴.

The last Labour government instituted a policy requiring all local authorities (including rural and parish councils) to develop neighbourhood plans that involved residents. Many councils were accused of undertaking a lazy tickbox exercise, but a significant number made extensive use of extensive participative and deliberative processes that succeeded in involving a significant percentage of residents and others in the process.

The LSPs also played an important role in collating neighbourhood plans into an overall strategic plan. For all their weaknesses the Local Strategic Partnership model effectively brought together a large cross section of stakeholders, including neighbourhood based community groups, to share information and discuss issues at a strategic level.

⁵⁴ Greater London Council Popular Planning Unit, 'The Peoples Plan for the Royal Docks' (Final, Greater London Council, Popular Planning Unit, 1984).

Conclusions

We also face another important question in creating a deeper democracy how do we meet the challenge of managing the nexus between elective, representative democratic systems and participative and deliberative structures?

We have seen that local people who are organised collectively through their community groups working in community partnerships with local services and politicians can be highly effective. But even at a neighbourhood level the relationship can sometimes become difficult, particularly when they face difficult issues and challenges or where there is a clear difference of opinion between the community representatives and the elected politicians.

Clashes and tensions are inevitable and can develop for many reasons from a number of levels in the system:

- structurally, for example between the formal systems of the council, the informal systems of the community organisations, fora and partnerships
- culturally in the way things are done, the unwritten rules, between differing ethnic and other social cultures and finally democratically
- questions of role, accountability and legitimacy between the democratically elected representatives of the neighbourhoods such as ward councillors and the community activists involved in participative decision making
- the role of council officers working with community activists in a participative and deliberative forum but who are also formally accountable to their managers and ultimately the political leadership of the council.

The case studies show that it is possible to begin developing an effective deep democracy. These examples have succeeded because the structural and organisational culture of the local authority has been changed, because of the employment of skilled community practitioners, because there is strong organisational and political leadership and support for the changes and because they have employed a very rich range of tools and approaches, such as participative budgeting, large scale open community planning processes, co-productive working methods and many other approaches that have facilitated effective participation and deliberation. But most importantly because residents believe that they are actively involved and listened to and that their ideas are being implemented.

Appendix 1: A Typology of 'Democratic Innovations'

In his useful review of initiatives for the Rowntree Power Commission, Graham Smith examined 57 'democratic innovations' that assessed of a range of *'democratic innovations that aimed to increase and deepen citizens involvement in the decision making process from around the world.'*⁵⁵ But there is a considerable body of literature that reviews the options, or advocates for a particular strategy or style.

Smith divides his typology of 57 democratic innovations into six categories:

1. Electoral, aimed at increasing voter turnout:
2. Consultation, aimed to inform decision makers, e.g. standard technique to gauge public opinion such as meetings and focus groups
3. Deliberation, the aim is to bring citizens together to deliberate on policy issues, in order to influence decision makes:
4. Co-governance, where citizens are given significant influence during the process of decision-making:
5. Direct Democracy, that aims to give citizens final decision –making power on key issues:
6. E-democracy, that aims to use information technology (and now social media) to engage citizens:

⁵⁵ Graham Smith, 'Beyond the Ballot: 57 Democratic Innovations from Around the World, ' (Review, Power inquiry/Joseph Rowntree Trust, 2005).

Appendix 2: Summary of Case Studies

Examples of Neighbourhood and Community Based Projects

Neighbourhoods and Communities

Partnerships

Townstal Community Partnership, Dartmouth, Devon

Pop: 4,000

Type: resident led multi-agency partnership

Description: est. 2009, development of neighbourhood plan, partnership oversee implementation. Employment of neighbourhood warden, running community centre, environmental projects.⁵⁶

Beacon Community Regeneration Partnership – (Penwerris & Old Hill area)

Falmouth, Cornwall

Pop:

Type: resident led multi-agency partnership, supported by community warden/community development worker

Description: estb 1996, regular meeting and planning exercises, problem solving and projects

Due East Neighbourhood Council, Whitehawk, Manor Farm & Bristol Estate, Brighton

Pop: approx. 12,000

Type: resident led multiagency 'partnership of partnerships',

Description: estb approx. 2000, covers three (mixed) housing estates, each with own neighbourhood forum, series of sub-groups concerned with health, community safety and education etc. Supported by community development worker(s)

Neighbourhood Self-Management

Coin Street – Southbank London

Type: community owned and self-managed housing, business regeneration area.

Description: estb. 1980/84, covers 13 acres previously derelict land, former GLC sold land to residents. Partnership Coin Street Community Builders (a registered community enterprise), membership includes Housing Coop and Coin Street Trust, plus direct resident representation.

Towns and Cities

Frome - Somerset

Pop: 27,000

Type: parish council

Description: overall strategy of council to build a '*vibrant community ... able to participate in local community life and decision making*'

Cooperative Councils - Nationwide

Pop: 20+ local authorities

Type: large cities and small cities, towns, London boroughs

Description: '*a new role for local authorities that replaces traditional models of top down governance... with local leadership, genuine co-operation, and a new approach built on... of the co-operative movement: collective action, co-operation, empowerment and enterprise.*

Seattle - USA

Pop: 3.8 mill

Type: Large city North America. Started in 1989, council devolved power to neighbourhoods

Description: Comprehensive strategy includes funding community-initiated projects, resident led neighbourhood planning program, little city halls.

Barcelona – Catalonia/Spain

Pop: 1.6mill

Type: neighbourhood councils residents & politicians, neighbourhood planning,

Description: emerged from popular radical 'citizen movement' (e.g. Los Indignados & Podemos etc.), 2015 radical administration elected committed to creation of implementation of systematic city wide 'citizens participation' strategy

Porto Allegre – Brazil

Pop: 1.5 million

Type: Participatory budgeting

Description: begun in 1990, open neighbourhood meeting review previous budget and discuss what they want from next, election of representatives for city-wide assembly that makes final decisions on budget.

Large Scale Planning

Peoples Plan for the Royal Docks - London

When: 1980's

Type: wide scale community planning exercise

Description: plan developed as an alternative to Thatcher Government proposals for the redevelopment of one of huge stretch of Thames riverbank (London Bridge to Beckton). GLC Popular Planning Unit funded and facilitated large partnership project involving residents, community groups, local authorities, businesses and academic institutions.

National Debates and Policies

GM Nation?

Ran in 2003

Type: Policy deliberation exercise re policy on genetically modified food.

Description: Funded by UK Govt, to encourage 'credible debate' on the issue. Independent, structured and facilitated deliberative exercise. 9 foundation meeting to decide on questions, 675 open regional and community meeting, 10 closed focus groups, Online information and feedback forms total of 36,557 returned.

Impact: finding generally opposed to GM, hard to know if exercise affected government policy who gave a 'guarded response'.

National Conversation on Mental Health – USA

Ran 2013

Type: nationwide deliberative and consultation exercise to help formulate federal policy on mental health

Description: combination of conventional town hall and community meetings and discussions, plus a series of more structured deliberative events, estimated 57,000+ took part in the deliberative element of the consultation.

Impact: helped inform mental health element of Affordable Care Act ('Obama Care')

Constitutional Change

Where: Including Scotland (1989-95), Iceland (2010-2012), British Columbia, Canada (2005-2007), Ireland (2012-2014).

Type: range of participative/deliberative approaches involving citizens and/or civic groups to explore issues re countries/provinces existing constitutions and to develop proposals for change.

Description: In case of Scotland, focus on involving civic organisations (Scottish TUC, faith groups, island councils & women's council etc.) in discussion, others varying forms of 'citizens juries' membership randomly selected from electoral role and nominations from politicians.

Impact: varied, Scottish and Irish process generally though successful. Processes employed in others also successful but mixed (largely limited) success in terms of achieving change from relevant governments.

Towards Deeper Democracy – a Response

Gabriel Chanan

Approach

Colin's paper reviews and revives a landscape of experiments and innovations dedicated to deepening democratic participation at the grass roots: community development, community organising, deliberative democracy, asset-based approaches and, more generally, participation and involvement. The stimulating array of projects implicitly poses the question of why they remain just that – a collection of projects which have never grown into a comprehensive, universal system. My aim in this complementary paper is to examine some of the obstacles to wider application of community action methods and to suggest how they might be overcome. I will focus particularly on community development (CD) as that has the longest pedigree of all the methods, and several of the others grew out of it. But what I have to say applies more or less to the whole spectrum of methods. I am concerned about the use of community action as an aspect of public policy, so my argument is addressed to policy-makers and commissioners of public services as much as to community practitioners.

Whilst I agree with Colin on the importance of all these bottom-up initiatives, I am not convinced that they can deepen democracy unless there is a specific top down plan for them to do so. I would like to see the movement grasp this paradox head on and confront the reality that to achieve maximum decentralisation demands effective use of centralised power. I therefore want to look at the history of national policy on community involvement, especially that of the last Labour government.

I will look at three questions:

1. Why we want this – what's wrong with democracy as it is, and what do we mean by deepening it?
2. What is the nearest we have come to a thoroughgoing community involvement system in England? (Divergent experience in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland after Devolution deserves separate treatment.)
3. Is community development, or some variant of it, capable of achieving it?

In addressing these questions I want to bring down to earth a debate which has a tendency to remain at the rarefied level of ideals. When we speak about pursuing new forms of politics, I want to ask whether the practical intention is to *replace* conventional parliamentary democracy, which the rhetoric sometimes seems to be saying, or to retain it but increase its accountability. In a debate which sometimes seems to reject the state and all centralisation I want to ask how, in the new vision, public services should be run. Public services are, after all, the very fabric of the state. Should they be wholly devolved to local responsibility? What level of 'local'? What framework of funding? What comparability of entitlement and quality from one locality to another? Can community action, or community development, alone drive the vision?

Why do we want a deeper democracy?

The primary reason for wanting deeper democracy can be stated fairly simply. As Colin mentions, about a third of the eligible population take no part in national elections, and about two thirds take no part in local elections. Of course, people are at liberty to be apathetic, or to have priorities other than politics. But as Colin suggests, the majority of this non-participation is probably not due to a considered and contented detachment but a general sense of powerlessness.

The first reason is therefore to stimulate a more active electorate, thereby ensuring a more sound **legitimacy** for elected government and local government. The act of participation – even by means of an occasional vote – also has a positive subjective effect: you are a conscious participant in society. How much stronger is this effect if you are active more frequently through taking part in other forms of local decision-making – in responding to consultations, in deliberative exercises, in campaigns of the kind that characterise community organising, or in community groups of any kind, whether to support carers, to improve the local environment, in a tenants' or residents' association, to take part in sports, in the activities of faith organisations, in choirs, social clubs, youth clubs, arts or drama clubs.

The second major reason for wanting deeper democracy is therefore about the **subjective effect on the participant** and the combined effect of **spreading social capital** amongst all participants and their families and social networks. This is a huge factor in fostering mental and physical health. Most of it is not concerned with political issues but in so far as it entails involvement in group decision-making it increases our understanding of society and our general sense of ownership and control.

A third reason is the **value of the activities** themselves. Localities which are rich in forms of participation offer more activities for everyone, more opportunities to make friends and pursue interests. Such areas feel more vibrant, more welcoming, more safe, more happy.

A fourth reason is the effect on the delivery and **quality of the public services**. Participation in public services may range from relatively passive forms, such as responding to surveys, to being active in a group which monitors delivery, and on to more sustained and interventive forms, participating in decision-making and forward planning or campaigning for change. Perhaps only a minority of residents will ever get involved in the more active forms of participation, but a locality in which even ten per cent of people are actively involved in public decision-making is qualitatively enormously different – for *all* residents – from one in which all decisions are made only by elected representatives and appointed officials. Better decisions are likely to be made, better information fed into making them and flowing from them, and the sense of shared control can filter down even to those not directly involved. One caution, though: it can't be assumed that the active ten per cent will automatically act in the interest of the 90 per cent. The relation between the active few and passive many needs to be examined. But this would be a minimal change. We are surely seeking a wider and more inclusive culture of involvement.

Improving the transparency and accountability of public services – whether delivered by public, private or voluntary agencies – is surely an area where there is potential

for wide public agreement, irrespective of party and ideology. We do not need to label this purpose as 'radical' or even 'progressive' to get wide assent to it. Indeed, labelling may deter assent. Broad credibility should be used as a lever. The public services – health, housing, policing, education, fire, transport, environment – play a huge part in our daily lives, with life and death consequences. It must be in everyone's interest to improve the way they are governed. This element alone - service user involvement - is quite sufficient to justify policies which facilitate a much higher level of participation.

It may, though, be asked whether user involvement counts as deepening democracy. Is it not simply good management? Forward-thinking private sector organisations constantly seek customer feedback. However, they do so only on their own terms, primarily to improve marketing, and possibly to improve products. Public services and instruments of governance should be seeking user feedback both to improve service and to help shape decisions. The users are the owners. This is a fundamental difference from the private sector. But the private sector is not a wholly separate sphere of activity, unaccountable to the public. It is a sphere in which independent activity has been licensed to operate within a framework of rules laid down in the public interest. Furthermore, where the private sector takes on contracts from the state or local government, it should be obliged to reproduce the same opportunities for public involvement which would apply if the service were directly delivered by a state agency.

From the above, we can summarise the key reasons for wanting wider community involvement as being

- greater legitimacy and accountability of elected representatives
- better mental health and social capital for participants
- better decision-making in public agencies
- greater accountability of public agencies and officials
- greater sense of ownership by citizens of their society
- greater sense of shared control by all citizens.

Recovering lost learning – the participation frontier

Between 1997 and 2008, when the financial crisis erupted, the greatest experiment in community participation ever yet mounted by a UK, or perhaps any, government took place. Its importance has been almost completely obscured by the more notorious aspects of the New Labour period, above all of course the Iraq war and runaway debt. But it remains a vital reference point for any future initiatives of this kind. Colin has described it, and its difficulties, in some detail, but what is most significant about New Labour policy on communities is that it grew from being a scheme to compensate a small selection of disadvantaged areas (a common government device) to being an obligatory universal framework across all local authorities in England. In other words, it was understood that society needed to promote community action not merely as an occasional stimulus in a scattering of disadvantaged areas but as part of a permanent transformation in our political culture. Community involvement needed to become an integral part of national governance.

The attempt to do this threw up all sorts of tensions between centralised policy and local community initiative. In debate and literature about community action, centralisation – or 'top down' direction – is generally painted as the villain of the piece,

whilst local community initiative is the hero. But this avoids precisely the need to manage these two complementary aspects of community-friendly policy. The necessary relation between centre and periphery is exactly the kind of issue we need to examine if we want to move beyond occasional and partial experiments into a new phase of democracy. We need to confront the fact that the tensions arise not only from government and public service unfamiliarity with how to work with communities but from community development's failure to work out how to work with government and public services.

The sequence of government action on community participation during the 1990s and 2000s deserves a name. Simply calling it 'New Labour's experiment in participation' forever associates it with a brand which became tarnished for quite different reasons. Let's call it the **participation frontier**, because that's what it was – going much further, more systematically than any of its precedents. Community development rhetoric was more radical on the surface in the 1960s but achieved nothing like the real flow of resources to community groups that took place in this period. Additionally, the developments which led to it were not purely a Labour product but had important roots in the preceding period, notably in regeneration projects during the Major-Heseltine period of Conservative rule during the first half of the 1990s.

The route to the participation frontier, and its subsequent decline, can be seen broadly in terms of eight stages⁵⁷:

Early 1990s (Conservative Government under John Major): The principle of community involvement is adopted into regeneration schemes following evaluation which shows that they cannot succeed without it. The principle of partnership between public, private and voluntary bodies is laid down. A small number of highly funded five-year local partnerships (31 City Challenges) is gradually placed by a much larger number of moderately funded 7-year local partnerships, the awkwardly named Single Regeneration Budget (SRB)⁵⁸, ultimately consisting of about 1000 local partnerships.

Mid 1990s: community involvement in regeneration partnerships is gradually transformed from a cosmetic add-on to being recognised as an objective element with concrete objectives and budgets parallel to objectives on housing, welfare, policing, education and environment. The health system tends to remain uninvolved in local partnerships despite internal pressures showing that community involvement is essential to achieving health.

1997-2000: New Labour landslide. The Conservatives' flagship regeneration scheme, SRB, is phased out for political reasons before full results of its evaluation are available. A new national inquiry on social inclusion leads to a National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (NSNR). NSNR starts by reinventing a small number of highly funded local partnerships – the New Deal for Communities – similar to the Conservatives' City Challenges but 'putting the community in the driving seat'. This sudden concentration of

⁵⁷ A fuller account of the early part of the period is in Gabriel Chanan, *Searching for Solid Foundations*, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2003

⁵⁸ The baffling word 'single' was meant to indicate that this budget had been created by top-slicing a number of different departmental budgets. 'Unified' would have made more sense, as well as providing the pleasanter and more relevant acronym URB.

major money in a limited scattering of localities, plus Treasury pressure to spend it rapidly or lose it, forces residents to take on professional management, thus pushing community involvement back to the margins.

2000 – 2005: More moderately funded neighbourhood renewal schemes are broadened out to many more localities, similarly to SRB. It is realised that community involvement is necessary not only for regeneration but for all public services. But proliferation of single issue community involvement schemes, relating to individual services, creates a confusing landscape of uncoordinated local initiatives.

2005 -2008 The emergence of the mature model: Local Strategic Partnerships link up the community involvement schemes of the different services, eliminate duplication and provide a platform for coordination across each local authority area. The health service however still stands somewhat aloof. In 2006 government puts the importance of community participation at the forefront of its policies on locality for the first time by instituting the Department for Communities and Local Government. This had formerly been in turn the *Department for Transport, Local Government and Regions*, *Department for Environment, Transport and Regions* and the *Office of the Deputy Prime Minister*. It was as if government (of any kind) could not make up its mind what this cluster of activities was about until it realised that you had to put communities first.

The rethinking was not merely in the surface rhetoric but was institutionalised by putting community participation at the top of the new list of criteria for successful local government and services. In a framework covering housing, education, policing, environment, health and all other major issues locally delivered, seven community involvement indicators topped the list⁵⁹.

2008: Financial crisis, MPs' expenses crisis and change of Labour government leadership. CLG's Community Empowerment Unit closed down.

2010: Coalition Government. Applauding the convenient Community Organising principle of 'independence from government funding', 'Big Society' downgrades community involvement onto a largely voluntary basis, while local authorities face massive cuts. Local partnerships begin to wither away.

⁵⁹ The community involvement indicators covered:

1. Whether people believe that people from different backgrounds get on well together in their local area.
2. Whether people feel they belong to their neighbourhood
3. Whether people take on decision making roles in local bodies
4. Whether people feel that they can influence decision-making in their local area
5. Overall satisfaction with the local area
6. Regular participation in volunteering
7. Whether community and voluntary sector organisations in the locality feel that the public authorities have created a good environment for them.

However, it is dubious whether item 5 necessarily has anything to do with community involvement.

Regeneration in general, which had become a carrier wave for community involvement, also declines sharply.

2015-17 'Big Society' has lost credibility and is not mentioned in election debates, though some of its schemes continue on a limited scale. Community involvement has disappeared from view as a national issue whilst local authorities variably try to keep it going under difficult conditions. Volunteering and community involvement declines⁶⁰. But the health service, somewhat protected from austerity, begins to develop its own community involvement models.

Thus in 1990 community involvement was largely a cosmetic addition to a small scattering of regeneration projects. By 2008 it was seen as an essential feature of the relationship between all public services and all residents.

These developments owed an important debt to input from the Community Development Foundation. Perhaps I can be forgiven for saying this with some feeling as I was involved, but aside from that it is an important illustration of the role of an independent national advisory body specialising in this field, which no longer exists in England. CDF showed how community involvement could be treated as a practical feature of regeneration planning, with measurable objectives analogous to those adopted for housing, jobs and education. One practical result was that an appreciable fraction of regeneration funding was channelled to thousands of community groups, and that when the regeneration model was generalised to public services as a whole, community involvement was inbuilt.

This meant that, over a period of 15 years of development, community involvement had graduated from being an optional side-issue to being a central and obligatory feature of public service and local government. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the significance of these changes was barely grasped by the media or many politicians. The experiment went through many phases, genuinely seeking to tackle the issue of how to reconcile optimum decentralisation with the need for consistency, fairness and progress across the whole of society. This dilemma would be faced again in any new attempt to maximise community involvement.

New Labour had arguably wasted two or three precious years closing down the Single Regeneration Budget and inventing the similar National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal. But in Labour's second and third terms this stream of activity matured into a genuinely universal system, not limited to regeneration areas but applied to all localities and all public services, through the (equally awkwardly named) Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) system. This model should be our starting point, otherwise there is a real danger that any new (not New) Labour government would literally repeat history by going again through all the phases of development on community involvement carried out by New Labour – perhaps, like them, just arriving at a viable model at the point where they lose political power.

The LSPs were not merely another community involvement initiative. They were a framework to draw together all existing forms of community involvement. They were, in fact, the first and so far only attempt to link together systematically community involvement in the delivery of all public services in each local authority area in

⁶⁰ *Community Life Survey 2016-17*, Office for Civil Society, DCMS, 2017

England. There had long been complaints about the lack of co-ordination at local level of all the services affecting a given locality. Each service followed its own rules and professional culture, sometimes even its own geography, creating problems whenever professionals or residents had to do anything which might involve more than one service. Most issues arising spontaneously from communities are of this nature. A housing issue turns out to be partly a transport issue, a transport issue is connected with employment, employment is connected with education, and so on. The necessary specialist agencies develop professional cultures which tend to insulate them from each other. CLG was now tasked with trying to overcome this well known 'silo effect' by co-ordinating the local delivery of services governed by other major departments. Its ability to do this depended on ministerial and senior civil service like-mindedness and leadership in the other departments, which was not always forthcoming.

On the positive side, police, fire and environmental services were enthusiastic. They could see how greater local coordination made it easier to achieve their own objectives. The health system, on the other hand, largely stood aloof, despite the fact that exactly the same logic applied in that field, a problem it is still wrestling with. But in all fields there was also a hierarchical problem: for coordination to work properly at ground level, fieldworkers needed scope to take initiative, to collaborate with other professionals, to be active beyond the narrow boundaries of their field and to be listened to when they fed community insights back to management. This required a new managerial culture of responsiveness and flexibility which was slow to develop. Community development strengthened community activity and voice, but could not on its own drive the necessary complementary changes in departmental philosophies and management styles. These needed to come from the top.

The vision faltered in 2008 in the midst of the financial crisis and was completely dispelled with the advent of the Coalition government in 2010. Ironically, the enlightened departmental name, Communities and Local Government, was retained during the Cameron-Clegg-Osborne years (and continuing) while the content, both in terms of communities and local government, was sharply degraded. The devastation was only briefly disguised by the Big Society fig-leaf, though some useful minor programmes from that initiative continue under the Office for Civil Society. In initiating Big Society in 2010 as though it was a new idea rather than a pale imitation of an old one, Cameron's coalition not merely diverted attention from austerity but positively encouraged national amnesia about the model for wide local participation fostered under New Labour drawing on earlier Conservative initiatives. Regrettably the Liberal Democrat junior partners in the Coalition left this area of policy unchallenged despite their own strong tradition of participative local government.

How could it be done now?

Massive and repeated cuts in resources are not compatible with proper public service delivery, let alone with community involvement in those services. It would be useless now to try to get better delivery and community involvement without restoring a decent level of public services. Campaigning for better community involvement without campaigning for better public services can only lead to fighting over crumbs from a diminished cake. But the restoration of provision for decent services must this time include a ringfenced fraction specifically for community involvement, which will otherwise always be swallowed up by short-term pressures. We are not starting from scratch. We are starting from a period of amnesia about the importance and methods

of community involvement, following a period of remarkable experimentation and practice. It is to be hoped that lost ground in understanding how communities work can be recovered and, Brexit permitting, that we can move on to complete the experimentation and maturing of CD into national practice that was in progress in the participation frontier. This should also review and take into account the more continuous experience of CD in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, where Big Society was shrewdly avoided.

The destruction of community development in England between 2010 and 2017 was barely noticed in the midst of all the other casualties of austerity. Yet its absence has been an important factor in the weakening of people's ability to get their voice heard in relation to issues of public safety, health, housing and all other public service areas. The CD perspective is missing from the debate about what to do to ensure, for example, that there will never again be a fire like the one at Grenfell house in June 2017. It is not enough to say 'the lesson is that all such towers should have different cladding, sprinklers etc'. Or to agonize about why long-gathering anxieties and warnings were not listened to, with heartfelt declarations that they must be listened to and acted on in the future – 'lessons will be learnt' – but *what* lessons?

There the debate stops short of the big underlying question, the question that would be posed by a thoroughgoing community development perspective: what conditions and processes in relationships between public services and their users need to be instituted as standard, mandatory practice in order to maximise the safety, value and accountability of public services across society? Advocates of a new approach to politics need to work out how, given the chance, they would administer the public services – the biggest practical daily job that government does.

A short answer in principle, based on the participation frontier, is that **each public service should be operated at local level by means of an active local partnership between providers and users, within the coordinating framework of a general local partnership across all public services..** The relationship between providers and users has to be restructured throughout the public services so that providers (irrespective of whether they are in the public, private or voluntary sector) *have to* listen and act, and have to be seen to do so. The lesson from the hospital scandals in Mid-Staffordshire and elsewhere is the same. Aside from the question of whether specific authorities or individuals were neglectful, it is essential to recognise that organisations have structural tendencies to exclude participation which have to be countered by structural requirements to include it. In making their voice heard and participating in decisions, users also need support and access to expertise parallel to that which is normal for management. Community development is a major part of that.

It is also important that participation should be, and be seen to be, collective as well as individual. Governments and managements will always default first to individualist solutions because the individual is so much weaker in face of the institution. A hospital, school, prison or housing agency can absorb any number of individual complaints without either the institution or the complainants ever realising the cumulative volume and repetitive pattern of the failings. We have to address the question of what keeps complaints invisible. There should be a national running register of complaints and recommendations made regarding local services, responses from management, and actions taken as a result, so that we can see all the time what the cumulative picture is. These are not distinctively CD solutions. You

don't need to know about CD to think of them. Yet they are not coming forward in a coherent way from anywhere else.

Community development is only one side of the coin.

Does this mean that re-instituting CD, or its variants, on a large scale would produce a participative society? No, CD is necessary but not sufficient. To institute CD on its own, without corresponding top-down measures, would be to set it up to fail – which is essentially what Big Society did.

The clue to the missing dimension is in the phrase 'on a large scale'. CD has been accustomed to operating, even when relatively widespread, on a small, 'experimental' scale. Despite lobbying and advocating for a universalistic, indeed utopian vision, in practice most CD accepts the small-scale and marginal as its natural vehicle. When the participation frontier created an exceptional opportunity to institute CD on a large scale, CD enthusiasts did not have the strategic thinking necessary to work out how that could be done.

Perhaps even more disabling, CD was in the habit of thinking of government as 'the enemy', and could not get into the state of mind where the state could be used as an instrument for good. It is the classic dilemma of being critical of misused power but, when opportunity arises, being unable to make the transition from opposition to wielding power. Despite usually being seen as 'lefty', CD's political instinct is in truth perhaps more anarchist than socialist. It therefore did not seize the opportunity to own and drive forward the participation frontier, but became a somewhat grudging partner in it. It was government itself that worked out a system for attempting the large-scale application of participation objectives which had been pioneered by CD on a small scale.

I think we are not framing the problem usefully if we say that New Labour never really understood how participation could be implemented because they struggled with the government's tendency to want to control everything. To make participation policy that works requires government to use its powers to make it happen, and that means controlling it. Yes there are inevitable tensions, but these tensions are the very stuff of democracy, not an obstacle to it which has to be dealt with before democracy can operate.

The limits of decentralisation

The key issue is what position we should take to the tensions between centralisation and decentralisation. Centralisation is not simply an unfortunate effect of large organisation. It is a necessary mechanism for making universalistic policies. It is not possible that all citizens and all localities will be happy with all policies. We can't drive on both sides of the road. If we want all blocks of flats to have sprinklers, we can't have some deciding not to.

The same principle applies to whether there should be an LSP-type partnership in every locality. CD is not capable of making this happen. It has to be instituted by national policy. CD is intrinsic to how local partnerships work, but investing in CD alone would not bring them about. The argument needs to be made from outside as

well as inside the CD box. And it's more effective to do so. We don't have to explain what CD is in order to recommend a system of partnerships. It might even muddy the argument to try to make it *through* CD. New Labour did not try to persuade local government and public services that partnerships were a CD instrument. They required them to institute partnerships in order to co-ordinate public, private and community inputs to local life. The partnerships *then* became a carrier wave for CD, because the officials on whom this obligation was laid looked around for experience on how to make them work, and this is what CD could offer. It's only after we've established the necessity for partnerships that it follows that CD is the necessary mechanism for facilitating them.

This also affects what sort of CD is required. It will be no use expecting that just any form of CD will be able to deliver effective partnerships. It has to be a version of CD that is committed to the idea of communities working positively with state agencies. It needs a new generation of CD training that includes how to make alliances with the spectrum of services, how to use their kind of language when appropriate, and (old bugbear to some) how to measure the beneficial results of community involvement. This kind of strategic thinking is a missing dimension in the National Occupational Standards for Community Development (NOS)⁶¹, which have been the classic UK framework for training community workers for the past few decades.

But CD practice only gets us so far. There has to be a national requirement to have local partnerships, and there must be national rules about how those partnerships should respond to communities. To adopt CD without a centrally-directed requirement that agencies must respond to community involvement would be setting CD up to fail. This includes private companies who are carrying out commissioned public service contracts. It wouldn't have mattered how loud the Grenfell Tower tenants had shouted over the years before the fire (and they did) – there was no firm requirement on the Tenant Management Organisation or the local authority – or the government - to take notice. The problem was not lack of voice but the lack of a statutory requirement on the authorities both to listen and to take action. This can't be achieved by CD 'creating the right circumstances in which this can happen' – it has to be done by national legislation. *Then* CD can play its part in facilitating it, including ensuring local compliance with central standards.

On universalistic criteria there is no substitute for state action, and we should acknowledge that community involvement is supplementary to this, not alternative. We need to be aware, at the same time, that this imperative is rejected by some interpretations of community development (CD), which take an anti-state position. This must affect what type of CD could be enlisted to achieve this agenda. Too much rhetoric echoes the idea that there is a fundamental conflict between centralisation and decentralisation, with 'radicalism' and 'change' attached to decentralisation whilst 'reactionary' and 'old way' are attached to centralisation. This tends to cede centralisation as the territory of the 'enemy', whereas in fact centralisation is the arena of power which we must command in order to ensure the right rules for

⁶¹ The NOS were developed and widely promoted by the Federation for Community Development Learning . Following the collapse of FCDLin 2016, the NOS are available, with much improved design, from www.esbendorsement.org.uk }

decentralisation. Community involvement cannot run the country. If it is widespread, it should be able to influence that governance substantially in the direction of greater fairness, greater sharing, greater solidarity. But at the end of the day these things have to be *legislated* for centrally and *facilitated* locally. I demur from description of tensions between central and local, communities and authorities, users and providers, which imply that they somehow shouldn't exist, as if they show that democracy isn't working or that they are unfortunate obstacles to participation. They *are* participation.

This seemingly slight semantic difference actually has far reaching implications for how CD is conceived and carried out. CD theory needs to be anchored in an overarching view of the interaction between central and decentral, *both* of which are accountable to everyone – centrally to people as citizens, decentrally to people as community members.

It is true that oppression and hierarchy gravitate naturally towards centralisation. Remoteness disguises unaccountability. And conversely protest and rebellion grow upon local roots and networks. The sense of fairness and fellowship springs from face to face relationships, from shared space and shared experiences. So the warm glow around decentralisation, and the stern appearance of centralisation, have a universal human basis.

But if we limit analysis to this counterposition, the overview that is essential for decisive action will continue to elude us. Only control of centralisation can bring about the appropriate methods of decentralisation and reconcile them with universal values.

Community development: essential but auxiliary

I would go further than saying CD 'can make a contribution' to deepening democracy. Democracy cannot be deepened without it. But it cannot be the main instrument for deepening democracy. Its distinctive and widely demonstrated role is facilitative. It seems incapable of proposing the necessary legislation and strategy for universal participation, though Scotland may be an exception, which should be studied in detail. The legislation has to come first so that CD can carry out its facilitative role.

Funding CD will not bring about a system of partnerships – CD needs to follow from such a system. CD workers cannot make partnerships work 'from below' if there are not the proper rules from above. We need a new national strategy of participation. CD is then part of the answer to how that can be made to work. During the participation frontier, government looked to CD for ideas on how to institute comprehensive community involvement but on the whole CD could not confront the problem of how to scale up from its fragmentary experience. So government had to invent ways of doing it, eventually developing the Local Strategic Partnership model, but this was never fully adopted by CD as a larger instrument to accomplish its vision. CD enthusiasts remained merely a particular lobby within a large landscape of partnerships, rather than the driver of partnerships.

One of the self-imposed obstacles to CD taking a larger strategic view of community action has been its tendency to resist forward planning of objectives and measurement of their outcomes. A long-nurtured mantra held that objectives could

not be prescribed in advance because the community itself must choose its direction of travel. Therefore methods of measurement could not be laid down either. CD must be free to take an improvised path and an indefinite time. But forward planning and some framework of objective measurement are rightly preconditions for any large scale public investment. We would be scandalised if our housing, health, education or other major services were to demand and consume large amounts of public money without setting out such plans. Why should significant public resources be devoted to community involvement without similar instruments? So the refusal of them continues to consign CD to the margins about which it bitterly complains.

In reality the argument against objectives and measurement is weak even on its own grounds. Over the years CD has often fallen into a muddled discourse, asserting that CD works on 'process not product', denying that objectives can be stated in advance or measured, whilst at the same time claiming that CD builds residents' confidence, networks and community groups – as though these were not predicted products whose achievement can be measured. The correct insistence on flexibility of method has incorrectly been taken to mean total flexibility of aim, whereas the values of CD itself adopt quite clear aims. We know enough about how communities work to be able to say, for example, 'Our aim is to increase the number of people participating in community groups in this neighbourhood', and to be measured by that outcome, whilst also asserting that *which* issues and groups will prove the best at mobilising people in this neighbourhood is a matter of residents' choices and experimental development.

Equally, in refusing measurement we refuse to identify the scale of the relevant population and therefore the extent of the impact. Whilst *practice* rightly insists on maintaining a flexible view of the community it works with, measurement has to be done on the basis of a specified local population, such as the residents of a ward, borough, village, estate or neighbourhood. But this does not need to *equate* the specified population with 'a community' or interfere with the flexibility of practice – it simply looks for community factors across a given population. These results can then be related with reasonable caveats to popularly understood neighbourhoods and territories.

The most sensible scale on which to do this is the electoral ward, because most other social statistics are collected at that level (and accessible in the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment for each locality that is shared by local authorities, health authorities and other services; normally available on line). If levels of community activity were regularly measured at ward level they could then be compared to all the other social information about that area, putting them on the policy map and ultimately enabling research to show the effects of community involvement on the whole social conditions of the area.

Ten conclusions from experience

1. A system of community involvement must be built on the revival of public services, not be used as a substitute for that.
2. The community involvement element, like the services themselves, must be guaranteed from the centre by central government and supported by a national system of criteria and community development.

3. The participation frontier experience of 1990-2010 should be closely reviewed for lessons both positive and negative about how this could be done. It took New Labour about eight years to develop a good model – the Local Strategic Partnership – historically not long, but too long in a system of five year parliaments.
4. A new CD curriculum and training should be based on an understanding of the essential interaction of central and local, state and community.
5. The new initiative should be given an intelligible name such as **People and Services Partnerships**, not a bureaucratic-sounding one like Single Regeneration Budget or Local Strategic Partnerships. It needs a transparent identity from the start that ordinary people can understand, not having to ask ‘What on earth does that mean?’
6. Don’t close down any existing partnerships that are working in order to establish a clean sheet. New Labour lost two or three years’ momentum by closing down the Tories’ SRB in order to run a national debate on overcoming social exclusion, which in due course led to the national strategy for neighbourhood renewal, much of which was SRB under another name. Identify any existing partnerships that are working and build around them. (Eg Big Locals, Neighbourhood Planning Groups).
7. Don’t let community involvement be captured by one major public service. This happens because government looks for a departmental home for such an initiative, instead of thinking through how to get all departments to participate in it. So during the early 2000s community involvement became ‘Safer and Stronger Communities’ – good in many ways but seen as being about policing and safety, and therefore *not* about health, housing, environment etc. The other departments could regard community involvement as outside their sphere, or invent their own unconnected forms of community involvement, so that neighbourhoods became littered with different initiatives with no coordination. Another couple of years lost.
8. People and services partnerships therefore need to be set up across the board from the start. This means they are also about the working relationships between the different services in the locality as well as about the services individually and their relation with users. The need to align health and care, for example, would come on to the agenda automatically.
9. Now that so many public services are farmed out to private contractors or mini-quangos, all such contracts must include a requirement to cooperate with and participate constructively in the locality-wide community involvement partnerships. Compliance should be monitored and affect criteria for bids and renewals.
10. Do not provide large amounts of money for a small number of disadvantaged areas with high pressure to spend. Allocate more gradual amounts to a larger number of areas, giving residents time and support to work up their development skills.

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About the Authors

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Colin is a Compass Associate specialising in issues related to constitutional development and community empowerment. His background is in community and neighbourhood empowerment. He has been a trade union and community activist, a neighbourhood community development worker and manager of a large local authority community development team. He has been involved in helping develop community empowerment and community development policy and practice at a local regional and national level. In 2005 he was seconded as a policy advisor to the Civil Renewal Unit at the Home Office. He was also vice chair of the Standing Conference for Community Development (later the Community Development Exchange), and taught and helped develop the curriculum for a foundation degree in community development at the University of Sussex. Freelance since 2005 he has been engaged in research, writing, teaching and consultancy work. He has a particular interest in the power of deliberative and participative forms of democratic decision-making and community led partnerships.

His published work includes:

- *Management: towards high standards in community development*, 2008
- (with Gabriel Chanan) '*Empowerment Skills for All: analysing skills and constructing a learning framework*', Homes and Communities Agency 2009.
- (with Gabriel Chanan) '*Rethinking Community Practice: developing transformative neighbourhoods*' for Policy Press in 2013 (with Gabriel Chanan)

For Compass

- *The Question of EVEL: a Review of Literature and Opinion*, Compass, 2015
- *Progressive Politics and the Question of English Votes for English Laws*, Compass and The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) 2015
- (with Andrea Westall). '*Transforming neighbourhoods, transforming democracy*' in '*Finding Our Voice: Making the 21st Century State*, (London: Compass, 2015)

Colin is also an internationally exhibited photographer
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Gabriel directed research and policy at the Community Development Foundation during the 1980s and 90s. He also carried out pioneering European research on community involvement. His studies for the Home Office (*Searching for Solid Foundations*, ODPM, 2003 and *Measures of Community*, CDF, 2004) led to the use of indicators of community strengths in government and local government policy. From 2005-8 he was seconded to the Home Office and Department for Communities and Local Government, working on community empowerment. Freelance from 2008, he carried out similar work for the Office for Civil Society, the Northern Ireland Assembly and Belfast City Council (with Community Places) and other bodies. In recent years he has focused on the sphere of health, publishing a handbook for *Commissioning Community Development in Health* (C4CC, 2017, with Brian Fisher). His study of *Shakespeare and Democracy* (Troubadour, 2015) highlights the historic continuity of fundamental political issues. He also writes plays and runs the Rattle'n'Roll Players. More information at www.gabrielchanan.co.uk

A Deeper Democracy web site and blog

www.deeperdemocracy.org.uk

To coin a phrase from Frome, deepening democracy is a shared problem that can only be solved by working together.

As publishing this pamphlet Colin has launched a web site and (moderated) blog space. The aim is to encourage debate, share views and information, challenge each other and help shape practical ideas on how a future government can begin to deepen our democracy. As the site develops it will publish papers from others and share information links and publications.

If you want to share your views, on what you think about the arguments in the pamphlet or if you have other ideas and example, or if you know of a good site, organisation, publication or video or event, then please contact him via the web site.