

More Power to the People Has Its Perils

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Trust in politicians is at an all-time low. They are all self-serving clones. All the parties say the same thing. If you want something done, you have to get Jamie Oliver to do it.

So say most, if not all, of us. The POWER commission, an independent body set up by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and chaired by Dame Helena Kennedy, recently reported on plummeting turnouts and the weakening of effective dialogue between governed and governors.

Its solution was to allow more decision-making by citizens. We should be given more *choice*, the current answer to every problem under the sun. Indeed, in saving politics from the politicians, the commission managed to more like politicians than politicians do: citizens are to 'download' power; local authorities should set up 'democracy hubs'. All this, in the higher meaninglessness, is to 'address the disconnect'.

Well, OK, if you say so. But downloading power is not as simple as it sounds (not that it sounds simple).

We have only ever had one national consultation exercise in the United Kingdom, a referendum in 1975 to decide whether we should remain in what was then called the European Economic Community. If we want to know what consulting the people is really like, then we should look closely at that episode, because it is Britain's most comprehensive experience of direct democracy. Studying it, as I have done in my book *The Referendum Roundabout*, tells us an awful lot about what happens when you attempt to bypass our representatives.

We had joined the EEC in 1973 under Tory Prime Minister Edward Heath. In those days, most politicians were in favour of membership, largely as a means of boosting Britain's economic performance. Opposition was confined to the far left, who thought (correctly) that the EEC was a capitalist club, the nationalist right and cultural conservatives who worried about sovereignty, and a smattering of others who were concerned about the effect of high food prices on the poor.

Viewers of BBC Four's recent drama *The Lavender List* will be well aware that mid-70s politics was a different world. Union leaders bestrode the land, and politicians were larger-than-life. Khaki Hoons and grey Hewitts couldn't have survived then. Tony Benn plotted to overthrow capitalism Enoch Powell wanted to throw all the immigrants out. Roy Jenkins was impossibly grand, churning out elegant biographies while running the country. Even Ted Heath, dull and charmless, was *so* dull he was interesting, *so* charmless he was quite endearing. But these crumpled, middle-aged

ideologues commanded turnouts that today's politicians, with their suits and focus groups and managementspeak, would kill for.

The referendum was certainly not intended to 'address the disconnect'; 70s politicians wouldn't have known what that meant. So what was it for? The answer was to save the Labour Party's bacon. In 1974, two indecisive general elections had left Harold Wilson as Prime Minister with a majority of 3. The cabinet was hopelessly split between pro-Europeans such as Jenkins and Shirley Williams, and antis such as Benn, Barbara Castle and Michael Foot. Wilson couldn't make policy on the EEC without offending one side or the other. The idea of a referendum came to save him.

Originally the idea was Benn's; Benn was (still is) an enthusiast for direct democracy, and the opinion polls told him he could win. But Wilson was keen; it would absolve him from the responsibility of making policy. Whichever side won, he could say to the losers "sorry, it wasn't my fault." With that device, he hoped to keep the Labour Party together.

Let us note in passing that it didn't work – within six years Labour had torn itself apart over Europe. But the real question is whether the referendum enhanced our democracy.

The answer is 'no'. The result was a big win for the pro-Europeans, but the disparity between the two sides' resources was huge. The pro-Europeans included all senior Tories, including their new leader Margaret Thatcher, all the Liberals and some senior Labour members. The antis were Labour backbenchers and some vocal Cabinet members, one or two Tory discontents, the SNP, Plaid Cymru, the Ulster Unionists including Enoch Powell and Ian Paisley, Sinn Fein, the Communist Party and the National Front. All national newspapers were pro with the exception of the communist Morning Star. The trade unions were generally but not exclusively anti; business was pro. That is some weight of opinion.

Weight translated into money; the pro-Europeans spent £105,000 on their four referendum broadcasts. Not a lot by today's standards, but a tad more than the antis' £2,500.

Furthermore, the pros constituted a coherent bunch of relatively popular politicians in the centre of the political spectrum, who happened to be in charge of fixing the question, the rules and the timing. The antis included some very unpopular people and never reconciled the nationalists with the hard left within and without the Labour Party. The antis led in the polls until the public saw them in action, whereupon opinion switched dramatically and permanently. The campaign barely mentioned the serious issues, and focused primarily on Tony Benn. One newspaper headline, 'Bennmania!' summed the whole thing up.

There are countries, such as Switzerland and the USA, with strong traditions of direct democracy and consultation, where referendums work. But where the representative tradition is strong, as in Britain, we must be careful not to undermine the representative relation, or to allow referendums to be used as tactics in the party political game.

I happen not to agree with any of the sentences in my opening paragraph. Politicians of all parties are much-maligned, and do a creditable job, under conditions of uncertainty and rapid change, with remarkably little corruption, in return for comparatively low recompense and outrageous intrusion into private life. There is no reason to think they make better, or for that matter worse, decisions than 'the people',

but they should be less wary of taking decisions when bold decision-making is required.

If I'm to be consulted, I'll say this: consult us once every four or five years, and in the meantime get on with the job you're paid for.

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