Rescuing Democracy

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We now review our diagnosis of democratic failure and our prescription to cure it by looking at previous diagnoses by others, to see how they compare with ours and whether our prescription — the People’s Forum — would address them as well.

Four decades before this book was written, political scientist Samuel P. Huntington and sociologists Joji Watanuki and Michel Crozier assessed democratic societies as ‘anomic’, or lacking in purpose. The assessment by Part 1 of this book is similar, with aimlessness predicted from three effects: ambiguity about who directs the polity; distraction of political agents by competitive struggles; and a compromising of the wisdom and social responsibility of some citizens with the disengagement of many others. Huntington, Watanuki and Crozier described this anomie in the following terms.

What is in short supply in democratic societies today is thus not consensus on the rules of the game but a sense of purpose as to what one should achieve by playing the game. In the past, people have found their purposes in religion, in nationalism, and in ideology… In Europe and Japan, after World War II, economic reconstruction and development were supported as goals by virtually all major groups in society… Now, however, these purposes have lost their salience and even come under challenge… In this situation, the machinery of democracy continues to operate, but the ability of the individuals operating that machinery to make decisions tends
to deteriorate. Without common purpose, there is no basis for common priorities, and without priorities, there are no grounds for distinguishing among competing private interests and claims… The system becomes one of anomic democracy, in which democratic politics becomes more an arena for the assertion of conflicting interests than a process for the building of common purposes. (Crozier et al. 1975, 159–61)

In Part 1 we reviewed recent examples of anomic democracy in the US and Australia, together with some indications that even the Nordic countries may be developing the malaise. Thirty-six years after the diagnosis by Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki, strategic studies scholar Hugh White (2011) offered an anecdotal observation of anomic in Japan.

The way the current government has responded to the tsunami—especially the nuclear crisis that followed—has intensified the sense that Japan’s political system today simply cannot deliver effective government able to deal with passing crises, let alone address the much deeper and ultimately more demanding long-term challenges Japan faces …

Japan deeply fears that, as China grows stronger, it will squeeze Japan economically, politically and strategically, reducing Japan to a kind of Chinese dependency …

… Japan has the basic resources needed to be a great power in Asia for many decades. But Japan will need not just a new government but a new kind of government. A young Japanese friend said to me recently that the only way for Japan to avoid decline was by replacing the whole political system. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, who resigned five years ago, was as good a leader as the present political system could deliver, and he was not good enough to halt Japan’s slide. What is needed, my friend told me, is a revolution — an end to money politics, careerist politicians and the rule of party bosses. A new politics formed by competing views of Japan’s future, rather than by competing factions and interest groups.
This might be interpreted as a call for a People’s Forum, as this design is intended to produce a ‘new politics formed by competing views of … [the] future’.

For another perspective on whether the Forum might improve democratic government, Ralf Dahrendorf’s (2000) assessment of the task appears useful. Drawing on his experience as a social scientist, a founder of the European Community and a member of the UK House of Lords, Dahrendorf identified five major problems for contemporary democracies. The first is that democracy works best when the people are strongly involved, which is usually when democracy is being fought for. Once it is well-established and citizens’ rights are generalized, conflicts become less urgent, more diffuse and the people tend to disengage. The People’s Forum may be able to counter this diffusion with its careful identification of issues, its formulation of crucial questions and its persistence with these for an extended time, so that citizens are encouraged to maintain their focus and thereby develop well-considered judgments and insist on their implementation.

Dahrendorf’s second democratic problem is that political democracy is linked to nation-states and, as their significance is eroded by globalization, government seems less relevant. As the Forum should be able to work across international domains it may be able to counter this decline, partly by developing an international form of democratic governance (via questions on supranational issues), but also by helping to clarify the responsibilities of each democracy with questions on national issues.

His third concern is a slide towards authoritarianism as national governments try to bypass parliaments by consolidating the power of executive systems, which in the US is led by the growing power of the presidency. Dahrendorf (2000, 312) describes this as

a curious development that has to do with the complexities of government, the need for expertise, and the as yet undefined role of the media … these trends need to be deplored or reversed, but no new mechanisms have been found to control ostensibly independent
bodies, rein in quangos, and channel vague expressions of public opinion.

The People’s Forum design may provide such a mechanism, as it should redefine the role of congresses and parliaments by having them more explicitly and more wisely directed by the people. This should clarify ‘vague expressions of public opinion’ and reverse any authoritarian trend.

Dahrendorf’s (2000, 313) fourth democratic problem is the flip side of the slide towards authoritarianism: the apathy of many citizens who are ‘tired of what they regard as the democratic game’. Such disengagement at the bottom strengthens authority at the top, but it should be countered by the People’s Forum offering citizens easy but meaningful ways to participate, such as voting once a year on strategic issues and, as they choose, engaging in sustained public discourse on the specific questions that the Forum poses on these.

Dahrendorf’s final democratic difficulty is that civil society has become less cohesive in ways that erode the social base of government. This is partly due to democracy overcoming class-based party struggles to produce generalized citizenship rights. As these are individual rights they tend to atomize collective identity, and this challenges us to ensure that tomorrow’s society will have the cohesion to function. Here again, the People’s Forum appears to offer an answer. It would provide an arena in which citizens come together and communicate systematically by selecting their agenda and steadily working through it.

The inquiry by Robert Putnam (1993), Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nanetti into the effects of institutional change in Italy provides another perspective on the prospects for the People’s Forum. In 1970, the Italian government created identical new regional governments, from the south with its narrow family-based morality to the north with its more inclusive outlook. Putnam and his colleagues assessed the effects of this institutional change that was applied uniformly across the country and came up with three broad lessons. The first was that ‘Social context and history profoundly condition the effectiveness of
institutions’ (1993, 182); the second was that ‘changing formal institutions can change political practice’ (1993, 184); and the third was that ‘most institutional history moves slowly’ (1993, 184). The first lesson indicates that the People’s Forum should be more effective and least likely to provoke violent conflict in open, inclusive societies that are accustomed to managing difference, while the second means that it may help closed and authoritarian societies to become more open and liberal. The third lesson may apply more effectively to new institutions that are not personally experienced by citizens than to those that all citizens can actively participate in. With the latter class, into which the People’s Forum falls, citizens will ‘learn by doing’ and therefore ‘institutional history’ may move quickly.

The somewhat controversial ‘selectorate theory’ developed by Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and his colleagues provides a useful perspective on triple dysfunction theory and thereby also on the potential of the People’s Forum. Selectorate theory is a rational choice view of how organisations such as dictatorships, democratic governments and corporations work. It underlies the game theoretic modelling that Bueno de Mesquita and others very successfully use to predict the outcome of ‘strategic situations’, as noted above in §9.3.1. In prefacing an introduction to their theory, Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2012, 264) observe: ‘For the citizens of democracies, life is good. But good does not preclude better.’ They note that ‘better’ is an optimal provision of public goods, which according to selectorate theory is achieved by maximizing the size of the group that keeps the leader in power. The most essential such group is the ‘winning coalition’, those ‘people whose support is essential if a leader is to survive in office’ (2012, 5). Less essential, but influential, is the group that effectively selects the leader, which is called the ‘real selectorate’, or the ‘influentials’. The largest relevant group is the ‘nominal selectorate’, which comprises all those (the ‘interchangeables’) who have at least some legal say in selecting their leader, such as citizens who are eligible to vote. From the perspective of selectorate theory it would seem that, if the People’s Forum receives the public support necessary for it to func-
tion, then it should improve the democratic provision of public goods because it would tend to enlarge both the real selectorate (the influentials) and the winning coalition (the essentials). A People’s Forum should expand the influentials by encouraging more of the interchangeables to join them by voting in its polls and by contributing to the development of public opinion on its questions via engagement in public discourse on these. Such activity should transform these participants in the Forum from interchangeables to influentials by giving them more influence over who leads their democratic government — because he or she will tend to be selected according to their conformity to the policy recommendations that Forum participants develop via their contributions to Forum polling trends. If the Forum becomes very influential, then its voters and those who campaign successfully on questions presented on the Forum’s ballot would virtually become part of the winning coalition, because they are then essential to the political survival of leaders in the sense that these voters and activists help to form the public opinion on policy that both selects and supports (via elections) only those leaders who will execute it. Thus, as the People’s Forum has the potential to increase the size of winning coalitions in democratic governments, selectorate theory indicates that (if it works) it would improve the quality of government.

Triple dysfunction theory and selectorate theory thus appear to complement each other. While selectorate theory has the wide scope of describing how democracies, autocracies and corporations are managed, triple dysfunction is restricted to democracies, how their structure tends to fail and thus how it might be improved. Triple dysfunction might therefore be considered to fit within selectorate theory and, from that perspective, the nominal selectorate might be regarded in triple dysfunction theory as the ‘nominal directorate’, because all those who have some legal say in selecting their leader (in selectorate theory) also have some possibility of influencing or directing government policy (in triple dysfunction theory). Likewise, in democracies the real selectorate (or influentials) can be considered to also be a ‘real directorate’. For example, in a democracy that suc-
ceeds in countering triple dysfunction with an institution like the People’s Forum, the real directorate (influentials) includes citizens who participate in that institution by voting in its polls, and/or by arguing and campaigning on the questions it runs, and/or by offering advice to PF managers on the composition of their ballot paper. The real directorate or influentials might even be considered to include those who distinguish themselves from the nominal directorate by utilizing the Forums’ polling trends as heuristics when they vote for parties and political candidates.

Considerable potential for the People’s Forum to help develop global governance may be inferred from remarks made by Pascal Lamy, director-general of the World Trade Organisation, as he observed that current institutions of that scope only have ‘secondary legitimacy’ as ‘assemblies of nation-states’. What they need to be effective is ‘primary legitimacy.’ That can only come by building up the ‘community of interests’ [to quote Zheng Bijian, former vice-chair of the Chinese Central Party School] by bringing global governance ‘closer to citizens,’ particularly by employing social networking technology so that ‘citizens are inhabited by a sense of togetherness’…

The great challenge, therefore, is how to move toward ‘a convergence of interests’ when the executive committee of global governance—the G20—is beset by centrifugal tendencies instead of drawn toward unity. (Berggruen and Gardels 2013, 156)

The People’s Forum may be essential for governance at this scale (as well as at the national scale) because it focuses on building the ‘primary legitimacy’ that comes from helping citizens to develop and implement their ideas on policy. It should therefore foster the requisite ‘sense of togetherness’ and ‘convergence of interests.’

Philanthropist George Soros, who has financed the development of democracy in several countries via his Open Society Foundation, identifies three priorities for political improvement in the US.
What can we do to preserve and reinvigorate open society in America? First, I should like to see efforts to help the public develop an immunity to Newspeak [George Orwell's 1984 term for deceptive official jargon]. Those who have been exposed to it from Nazi or Communist times have an allergic reaction to it; but the broad public is highly susceptible.

Second, I should like to convince the American public of the merits of facing harsh reality …

But improving the quality of political discourse is not enough. We must also find the right policies to deal with the very real problems confronting the country. (Soros 2011, 16)

These three priorities are close to those of the People's Forum: To raise the level of public discourse on public affairs and then shape public policy with the resultant enlightened views.

On the urgency of improving democratic governance, Gus Speth provides an environmental perspective. He observes that we’re trying to do environmental policy and activism within a system that is simply too powerful. It’s today’s capitalism, with its overwhelming commitment to growth at all costs, its devolution of tremendous power into the corporate sector, and its blind faith in a market riddled with externalities … The only solution is to … figure out what needs to be done to change today’s capitalism … We need a new political movement in the US to drive this … The economy we have now is an inherently rapacious and ruthless system. It is up to citizens to inject values that reflect human aspirations rather than just making money … But groups, whether they’re concerned about social issues, social justice, the environment, or effective politics, are failing because they’re not working together. (cited in Else 2008, 48)

In Chapter 5, the analysis of the ‘scarcity multiplier’ demonstrates what is needed ‘to change today’s capitalism’. Part 1 initiated that analysis with its diagnosis of ‘triple dysfunction’ and Part 2 followed it up by prescribing the People’s Forum as a remedy. This institution could be the crucial tool for Speth’s ‘new
political movement … to inject values that reflect human aspirations.

It is even possible that the Forum may find an important heuristic role in some non-democratic regimes. As China scholar David Lampton (2014) observes, that country is changing and now ‘almost all Chinese leaders openly speak about the importance of public opinion … China has built a large apparatus aimed at measuring people’s views … [and] has even begun using survey data to help assess whether CCP officials deserve promotion.’ This trend demonstrates the widespread need for public opinion to be well developed in both autocratic and liberal democratic systems. People’s Forums should facilitate such development, not only directly, but also indirectly by strongly implying that free media are crucial in helping public opinion to become more sophisticated.

This book observes that political science indicates five of the most influential behaviours in democratic politics are: (1) electors and their representatives tend to be confused about whether the latter are trustees or delegates (see the concluding part of §2.2); (2) a very large majority of citizens is politically disengaged and ignorant of public affairs and policy (§2.2.3, §2.2.4); (3) many citizens rely on heuristics to guide their vote (§2.2.3) and some of this reliance is expressed by them being quite happy to leave the work of becoming knowledgeable on public policy and trying to influence government to others, such as politicians and NGOs, provided that they can have a say when they want to (§7.2.3); (4) citizens are increasingly disillusioned with traditional electoral, party-based politics and are engaging more through issues, as noted in Chapter 1 (see its references to Andersen and Hoff, Kevill, Brett and the rise of NGOs campaigning on issues); (5) small numbers of citizens with intense common interests find it much easier to organize politically than large numbers of citizens with less direct common interests, which often corrupts public policy because the intense interests of small influential groups are usually focused on narrow concerns, such as their private goods (see Olson’s Law, §2.3.2).
The People's Forum's poll addresses each of these behaviours. As triple dysfunction theory sees the confusion of responsibilities noted in (1) above as caused by an organizational flaw, the People's Forum would ameliorate it by reducing the area of responsibility that elections attempt to delegate from citizens and by clarifying the responsibilities that then remain with citizens (i.e. strategic policy) and their representatives (tactical and operational policy). The Forum would minimize the damage to governance from citizens' disengagement and ignorance (2 above) by assisting them to delegate responsibility to those among them who do engage (3 above). It would facilitate more engagement by citizens with issues (4 above), and in doing so provide constructive heuristics for voters (3 above). That combination should tend to replace the dubious heuristics currently provided by political candidates and parties (e.g. see §7.2.6), which tend to be more about personalities and dramas of political power than about issues and policies. The People's Forum should minimize the operation of Olson's Law (5 above) by assisting all citizens to organize politically — by helping them, first, to develop their opinions on public affairs and then to collectively pressure their political agents to implement those developed opinions.

In doing these things, the People's Forum would be taking advantage of what has been argued in this book to be the main democratic problem. This is the ambiguous delegation (1 above) that seems to make it acceptable for citizens to remain ignorant on important issues while trying to compensate by using heuristics as they vote in elections, public opinion polls and referendums. The Forum's voluntary, self-selective, repetitive voting would actually use this widespread democratic disengagement to produce sophisticated results — because those who are disengaged will exclude themselves from Forum polls, while those who do engage should become progressively better informed on public policy via that engagement. As it produces this sophistication, the Forum would be assisted to inject it into government policy and legislation by the reliance of the disengaged mass public on heuristics. This may be achieved by the Forum regu-
larly publicizing both its results and their deliberated quality in order to encourage citizens to use them as guides for their vote.

The comparison given in §6.5.2 of several proposed new forms of democratic government, together with the assessment in §9.3 of the necessary conditions for experimental tests of the People’s Forum, indicates that this institutional design warrants a trial. To do this it should be run for at least three years across either an entire province or nation, which might be sufficient exposure for many citizens to start to understand it and to use it. The result of the trial may be made more conclusive by concurrently running one or more intensive deliberation forums to try to produce mutually supportive interactions, as discussed in §9.1. To consider which forums to run in this context, they might be separated into two classes: open (self-selected participation) intensive forums such as National Issues Forums, Study Circles, AmericaSpeaks and Minnesota E-Democracy; and restricted (such as random selection participation) intensive forums like deliberative opinion polls, online deliberative polling, consensus conferences, planning cells and citizens’ assemblies. Open intensive forums might make some contribution by assisting in very limited ways to develop mass public opinion on the questions posed by the People’s Forum’s ballot paper. Restricted (randomly selected participation) intensive forums might contribute by helping to develop political influence for Forum polls. They may do this by providing the mass public with heuristics for voting in elections, in public opinion polls and in referendums. These heuristics would be the findings of those strongly representative intensive forums on Forum questions, as they would show (by random sample) how the mass public would respond to those questions if it carefully deliberated them. Restricted participation intensive forums are therefore likely, not only to largely agree with People’s Forum trends, but also to be understood to some extent by citizens as saying what the mass public would, if everyone had the resources, time and incentive to carefully consider those questions. Publicity for the findings of restricted participation intensive forums may therefore en-
courage citizens at large to support politicians and candidates who promise to implement the Forum’s trends.

Although the People’s Forum is recommended here as the most feasible and effective way to start to improve democratic government, its effects may be slow to develop. Its focus on long-running issues should help citizens gradually build pressure on their representatives to improve strategic policies, laws and basic structures of governance, such as constitutions, unwritten conventions and other institutions. A few examples of such structural reforms are: restricting the types and thus the number of public servants who are appointed by popular election; eliminating gerrymanders by having district boundaries redrawn by impartial commissions; and eventually, perhaps, appointing legislators by sortition instead of by election.

As proposed in the opening Synopsis, the People’s Forum might become a new branch of democratic government, and if it did, it should fill a yawning gap in their structures. This is that the public opinion on which they run is ‘woefully uninformed’ (see the first paragraph of §2.2.3). The Forum should ameliorate this fundamental fault by helping citizens develop their knowledge and opinions on public affairs and by providing constructive heuristics for those who don’t. Not until this is done will democratic governments have good foundations for their executive, legislative, judicial and administrative branches. The new branch might be dubbed the ‘opinion development branch’ or the ‘public deliberation branch’.

To conclude, we might note that the design of the Forum conforms to Marsh’s (2000, 200) judgment that, in Australia at least, it is crucial to create a ‘political capacity to seed opinion formation and to help mobilize consent’. This includes capacities ‘to engage interest groups and issue movements in a forum that can challenge the executive’ and ‘attract media attention’. The People’s Forum should be able to do those things. Its design appreciates that any citizen may have the interests, knowledge, sensitivities and sense of civic responsibility that can help. This open, accessible and careful approach may help us work together towards a safer and more fulfilling future.