

Simon Burall

Simon Burall is the Director of Involve. He has long and extensive experience in the fields of democratic reform, governance, public participation, stakeholder engagement, and accountability and transparency. He has worked at the national level in Africa, Asia and Europe as well as on related issues of global governance and democracy.

In addition to his role with Involve, Simon is also the chair of Democratic Audit, an ambassador for World Wildlife Fund UK (WWF UK) and a member of the steering committee of the Science Wise Expert Resource Centre.

Before moving to Involve Simon was a research fellow at Overseas Development Institute (ODI) from 2006–2009. His interests included stakeholder engagement in the reform of the international aid delivery system and how to make development finance more effective. Prior to this he was the Executive Director of the One World Trust from 1999–2005 where he initiated and oversaw the development of the influential Global Accountability Index. Before joining the Trust, Simon re-established the UK volunteer network for AFS, an organisation based in Leeds coordinating intercultural exchange visits. Simon has taught both science and English in Namibia and Zimbabwe and was an election monitor in Bosnia Herzegovina in 1997.



From Ballot Box to Dictatorship? Engaging in the Struggle for Democracy

Democracy, it seems, is always in crisis. At the turn of the last century the fight for universal suffrage was long, hard and, in the case of Emily Davison under the hooves of the King's horse, deadly. One hundred years on, as a result of the expenses scandal combined with the inability of our democratic institutions and process to meet the needs and aspirations of citizens, our democracy is again in deep crisis.

I want to focus on a different aspect of the crisis to explore an aspect of democratic reform. This aspect has received limited attention from policy makers and the press as they have focused on more visible aspects of the crisis, such as who bought the duck house and whether or not this or that person deserves a peerage. The issue I want to focus on is barely acknowledged and poorly understood by most commentators, but presents a profound threat to our democratic way of life. Fundamental reform of our institutions of representative democracy will, alone, not solve this crisis. We need to think about our democracy in a totally new way.

Global society faces a number of critically important, yet hugely complex issues which threaten the way we live. One of these is, of course, climate change. Another is the wave of global demographic change which is hitting western nations first, but will eventually roll across the rest of the globe.

In earlier, simpler times, the problems that faced society were relatively simple. Well planned and executed government action could deliver a solution. Compare cholera and diabetes, for example. Cholera can be eliminated by shutting down infected wells, cleaning up the water supplies and providing a little public education to ensure that people wash their hands properly. While the solution needs money and advanced engineering, government can deliver it from the centre.

Diabetes is totally different; it impacts individuals rather than communities. Beyond the genetic factors, the causes of diabetes are largely individual choices about diet, exercise and lifestyle. While government can play a role in educating the public about these risk factors, there is a limit to the central planning and implementation – at least of the kind acceptable in western democracies – which can be used by governments as they try to solve the problem. Individuals must take action themselves. Like many problems facing government today, both problem and solution have become distributed out into society; often, only communities and individuals can provide the solution.

This has implications for our democracy that I want to explore through looking at how to respond to climate change.

Some of the solutions to climate change lie with government. Decisions about our energy mix in 30 years' time, providing financial frameworks for long-term investment for industry, and investing in new, less energy intensive transport infrastructures, are some examples. However, a large part of the solution lies with individual behaviour change. Just as with diabetes, both the problem and the solution are distributed.

However, climate change is an issue of a completely different order to diabetes. It will impact on our economies, our environments and our social, political and cultural structures in profound ways. Even the actions that lie within the realm of central government capability are deeply, politically unpalatable; think of the significant local resistance to wind farms for example, let alone shifting investment from private to public transport. Inertia appears built into the system, but our political leaders are able to respond in meaningful ways.

The challenge to developing a rational policy response results from a number of factors. Firstly, the scientific evidence is bitterly contested. The political debate is therefore about the evidence itself, not the policy solutions; the choices faced by society and the compromises which must be made. This will be difficult to change because the science is inherently uncertain; the best that scientists can do is estimate levels of uncertainty. The same is true of the risks attached to different courses of action. Our current political set-up, with regular elections and strong media debate doesn't deal well with uncertainty. Our soundbite culture pushes politicians into being for or against something rather than giving them the space, at least in public, to explore the uncertainties.

Climate change is also a transnational problem with transnational effects. However big or economically powerful, no country working alone can deliver a solution for its citizens. To make matters worse these effects, and the impacts of the policies to deal with the problem, are not uniformly felt. Different communities and nations will be affected in different ways both by climate change and by any potential solutions. This leads us into a collective action problem of a type with which the world has never dealt before. The international debate about policy solutions rapidly descends

into countries looking to protect national self-interest rather than the wider good, thus risking everyone.

It seems clear that our elected politicians, with their national outlook built on a maximum five-year time frame, are unable to deliver us the solutions we need. James Lovelock, the scientist behind the Gaia theory, paints a bleak picture, 'Even the best democracies agree that when a major war approaches, democracy must be put on hold... I have a feeling that climate change may be an issue as severe as war. It may be necessary to put democracy on hold for a while.' One question that this raises is: who should be our dictator, or slightly less pejoratively, our green Winston Churchill? The response I got on Twitter was Vince Cable. For all of his positive qualities I'd argue that he doesn't really cut it.

So we need a different way of doing democracy. We need to involve citizens beyond their quintennial visits to the ballot box. We need to engage them in actively defining the problem and the solutions to it.

A significant body of experience has already developed over the past 30–40 years. A whole range of tools, mechanisms, institutions and processes now exist to engage individual communities in a range of problems. It is possible to point to a large number of positive stories, from small neighbourhoods in Tower Hamlets to huge cities like Porto Alegre, where citizens have been engaged in challenging political debates and decisions to the benefit of large numbers of people. Here in the UK we are developing a range of experience in engaging the public in dialogue about deeply technical moral and complex issues such as nanotechnology and hybrid embryos with positive effects for the scientists, policy makers and public involved.

However, engaging the public in this way has almost exclusively been done to feed into, or on rare occasions take, specific decisions. Indeed, in the UK there is a significant risk that the public engagement field is turning from one where citizens are actively engaged in debates and decisions that affect them, into a field where they are treated as research subjects for extracting information about how a demographically representative group of citizens react to different policy options.

Added to this, current methods of public engagement are ill-suited to dealing with problems such as climate change for a number of reasons. One of the most significant is scale. The methods and techniques we have developed pull small numbers of citizens out of their daily lives and into a room for longer or shorter

periods of time. They are normally, except for decisions at the most local level, picked not because they know one another, but because as a group they represent the demographic characteristics of the wider community. When they disperse they are unable to impact on the wider debate because they are isolated from their peers and decision makers.

The challenge facing policy makers is how to take the debate off the floor of the House of Commons, out into the community in a way that engages a critical mass. Engaging large numbers of people in real dialogue is challenging enough, but connecting that dialogue back to those who have to make the final decision makes the task even harder.

Trust in politicians is at an all-time low, not just in the UK, but across the western world. They have neither the authority nor legitimacy to exert the leadership needed to put their countries and our world on a path out of the climate crisis. Engaging the public in an active, open and meaningful way is not a nice little extra, it is absolutely necessary if we are to solve problems such as climate change, which require all of us to make compromises and challenging changes to our lifestyles. Either that or we should install Vince in a palace now and let him get on with it.