

The Contemporary Crisis of Representative Democracy*

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Is there a crisis of democracy? At one level democracy is always in crisis, and as authoritative historians of representative democracy note¹, there has never been a period in the evolution of representative democracy when someone somewhere has not declared democracy to be in crisis. What is unusual in the current conjuncture is the degree of consensus underpinning the analysis. In the past those that were shrieking ‘Fire!’ tended to be in a minority—oddball figures, radicals and zealots. Today, it would be easier to assemble those who *didn’t* think something fundamental was amiss than those who did. Political scientists, not noted for alarmist tendencies, huddle in conferences entitled ‘Representation and Renewal’, ‘The party’s over?’, and so forth.² A minor publishing industry has sprung up to examine the contours of the crisis and where it is heading. Texts already pick over the entrails of the ‘dead’ democratic body and our ‘post-democratic’ future.³ Nor is the sense of crisis confined to those with a particular political leaning. Liberals, conservatives and Marxists agree that at some level or other representative democracy is in the doldrums. Where they disagree is what to do about it. But let’s ponder for a moment what is peculiar about this particular conjuncture.

Contours of a crisis

What we can note is that the various measures used by political scientists to measure the health and well-being of representative democracy are on a downward trend. Amongst these measures, four stand out: *voter turnout*, *party membership*, *trust in politicians*, and *interest in politics*. As regards voter turnout, it is becoming ever more evident that we are becoming reluctant voters.⁴ This is highly marked at moments in time or in contexts where little seems to be at stake. On the other hand, where voters

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¹ Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997; Pierre Rosanvallon, *Democratic Legitimacy: Impartiality, Reflexivity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2011.

² Respectively the themes of the American Political Science Association annual conference 2012 and the UK Political Studies Association annual conference 2013.

³ Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, Polity, Cambridge, 2004; John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*, Simon & Schuster, London, 2009; Donatella Della Porta, *Can Democracy be Saved? Participation, Deliberation and Social Movements*, Polity, Cambridge, 2013.

⁴ Russell J. Dalton, *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012; Colin Hay, *Why We Hate Politics*, Polity, Cambridge, 2007.

perceive a lot to be at stake, we can see an upturn.⁵ However, the general tendency is clear. The golden age of voter turnout was half a century ago, and since then we have seen a fairly steady decline more or less across the board as far as the advanced democracies are concerned.

Perhaps a more telling measure of the decline of representative democracy is the decline of *party membership*. Parties are the crucial point of mediation between citizens and the institutions of governance and are thus a vital measure of health as far as political engagement is concerned. Again, the picture is clear.⁶ In the 1960s it was common to see around 30 per cent of the voting population in the advanced democracies as members of political parties. Today we see a fraction of that figure, often as low as one to two per cent of the voting population. Citizens are deserting political parties in droves. The result is that parties are forced to huddle up to other sources of financial support, notably corporations and private benefactors. This feeds the problem of distance from the ordinary citizen, creating a vicious circle. The closer they get to business, the less they seem to care about the needs and wishes of the ordinary voter, or indeed party member.

This in turn feeds the third variable, which is the *declining trust* in politicians. Survey after survey shows that we hold politicians in near complete contempt.⁷ A recent survey in Australia found that only four per cent of citizens thought that politicians could ‘almost always’ be trusted.⁸ Another survey placed politicians in last place among a basket of professionals that included second-hand car salesmen, lawyers and estate agents. The very word ‘politician’ has become a byword for sleaze, self-serving, narcissism and incompetence. Long gone are the days when ‘politician’ meant ‘public servant’, and when public service meant putting to one side one’s own needs and interests in favour of those of the collective. The phenomenon has given rise to the emergence of populist anti-politics. Some of the great political successes of the last decade or so—the Tea Party, the Five Star Movement, the UK Independence Party—are led by figures who trade on contempt for political elites.

⁵ Bernhard Wessels, ‘Performance and Deficits of Present-Day Representation’ in S. Alonso, J. Keane, W. Merkel and M. Fotou (eds), *The Future of Representative Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011.

⁶ Peter Mair and Ingrid Van Biezen, ‘Party Membership in Twenty European Democracies, 1980–2000’, *Party Politics*, vol. 7, no. 1, January 2001, pp. 5–21; Ingrid Van Biezen, Peter Mair and Thomas Poguntke, ‘Going, Going, ... Gone? The Decline of Party Membership in Contemporary Europe’, *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 51, no. 1, January 2012, pp. 24–56.

⁷ Murray Goot, ‘Distrustful, Disenchanted and Disengaged? Polled Opinion on Politics, Politicians and the Parties: An Historical Perspective’, *Papers on Parliament*, no. 38, April 2002, pp. 17–58.

⁸ Scanlon Foundation, *Mapping Social Cohesion National Report 2013*, report prepared by Andrew Markus, p. 27, <http://scanlonfoundation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/mapping-social-cohesion-national-report-2013.pdf>.

Finally, we need to mention *interest in politics*. Whatever measure one cares to choose, whether it be the number of pages in the newspapers devoted to coverage of mainstream politics, the number of hours broadcast on the popular or mainstream media devoted to elections and parliament, or the general knowledge of ordinary citizens, the picture is bleak.⁹ We no longer care about politics as this is usually defined. Citizens have turned their backs on the affairs of politicians, except of course when that can be read literally, as sexual affairs. We are interested in mainstream politics when it is a story wrapped in a negative: when it shows politicians in a bad light, doing bad things to bad ends.

Democrats against democracy

So at one level, it is now a truism to note that democracy is in crisis. Yet this is not the whole story. As Wolfgang Merkel and others have rightly pointed out, when citizens are asked in broad terms about whether they support democracy and democratic institutions they tend to agree, often strongly.¹⁰ There is no real challenge to the hegemony of ‘democracy’ in the contemporary imaginary. Rather we should be interested in the crisis of actually existing *representative* democracy, a democracy that rotates around politicians, elections and parliaments. This kind of democracy is in crisis—though saying that should not be taken as implying that there is any likelihood of representative democracy disappearing soon. It won’t. One of the virtues of representative democracy according to advocates like J.S. Mill is, paradoxically, that it barely needs us, the *demos*, at all. Whether 80 per cent, 60 per cent or 10 per cent of citizens turn up to vote does not affect the capacity of the system to reproduce itself. We need to be careful therefore not to assume that a decline in engagement equates to systemic crisis. If the cause of the current crisis is apathy, as many believe it is, then this might as well be read as a help to the system. Apathetic citizens are citizens who pose little threat to elites, rather they can be watched, governed, taxed and pushed around with impunity. Democracies are not going to collapse because citizens are reluctant to turn up to vote or join political parties.

So we’re in a particular kind of crisis—less a crisis that threatens the ability of the system to reproduce itself so much as one in terms of public engagement with party-based liberal democratic politics. Representative democracy looks and feels exhausted. Why?

⁹ Stephen Earl Bennett, ‘Young Americans’ Indifference to Media Coverage of Public Affairs’, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, vol. 31, no. 3, September 1998, pp. 535–541; John Corner and Dick Pels (eds), *Media and the Restyling of Politics: Consumerism, Celebrity and Cynicism*, Sage, London, 2003.

¹⁰ Alonso et al. (eds), op. cit.

Much of the stress in current commentary lies on short term or contingent factors: New Public Management, the rise of neoliberalism, the decadence of the current crop of politicians, and so forth.¹¹ It is for this reason that many normative democratic theorists believe that, with a few tweaks here and there, democracy can be restored to vigour. I think we should be more cautious in our assessment. This is a crisis located in longer term structural and technological changes that are now beginning to be felt in the political field as well as the economic and social fields where the transition to ‘reflexive’ or ‘second’ modernity is well documented.

Representative democracy is a product of the modern imaginary. This in turn is built on a series of relatively simple propositions. These include the idea of the *nation state* as a relatively homogeneous and distinct territorial entity. It also includes the idea of *sovereignty* as something located in the state and which can therefore be held and possessed in the manner of a tool or resource. Integral to the idea of representative democracy is the idea that power is exercised in the name of *the people*, or rather its representatives. The exhaustion of representative democracy correlates to the progressive irrelevance of this particular image of how power and politics works under contemporary conditions.

As is well documented in the social theory and sociological commentary on the evolution of modernity, these building blocks of our understanding of the political landscape are waning in terms of their utility.¹² We are steadily and inexorably moving towards complex territorialities, complex sovereignties, and complex non- or post-identities. As regards the first, obviously much has been written about the impact of globalisation on the integrity of the nation state. The reality for most nations in the world is that they increasingly rely on regional alliances, blocs, coalitions, all of which press against the image of the post-Westphalian state. The nation state may have a certain resonance for certain purposes, but citizens increasingly understand that for much of the time and for many purposes the action is elsewhere.

This in turn impacts on the nature of sovereignty. The image of the autarchic self-governing community at the heart of a certain image of democracy is fading. It is not just a matter of territorial or geographical interdependence but of the nature of global capitalism, which in large part operates beyond and outside the jurisdiction of discrete states.¹³ This is not the same as saying that states are unimportant, or that they have no

¹¹ Matthew Flinders, *Defending Politics: Why Democracy Matters in the Twenty-First Century*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012; Hay, op. cit.

¹² David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1989; Ulrich Beck, *The Reinvention of Politics: Rethinking Modernity in the Global Social Order*, Mark Ritter (trans.), Polity Press, Cambridge, 1997; Jürgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*, Max Pensky (trans. and ed.), Polity Press, Cambridge, 2001.

¹³ Crouch, op. cit.; Hay, op. cit.

power. What it means is that the fate of ordinary citizens is much less dependent on the decisions of national politicians and much more dependent on the decisions of a welter of transnational corporations, money markets, derivatives traders, international agencies and so on. All of these agencies exercise power. They all have an impact on what it is that states can do and must do under threat of sanction.

Globalisation has also impacted the integrity and plausibility of ‘the people’ as the subject of democratic deliberation and procedures.¹⁴ The idea of the people as an actor or agent in its own fortunes was always more myth than reality, but it at least held some plausibility in the minds of ordinary citizens in an era of relatively homogeneous ethnicities and nationalities. As transnational migration, decolonisation, and the diaspora effects of various political and economic processes speed up, this singular image of the people is undermined. Leaders stand Canute-like in the face of these forces, seeking ways of instilling ‘patriotism’, loyalty and a sense of national pride in their increasingly bemused or indifferent citizenry.

The end of representative politics

In the wake of these changes, it should be little surprise to find that the energies of the most politically active parts of the citizenry have moved away from a preoccupation with capturing power at the nation state level to enact a comprehensive program or manifesto—the rationale of party-based representative politics. Today’s activisms and political initiatives are better encapsulated in terms of *contesting injustice*, whether it be issues around migration, climate change, sweatshops, animal rights, austerity or whatever. Alongside this changing disposition is the adoption of repertoires of activism that dispense with the party in favour of flatter or more ‘horizontal’ styles of interaction based on networks.¹⁵ This tendency, which has become increasingly evident over the past three or four decades, has been further catalysed by much commented upon developments in ICT and social media.¹⁶ In effect we are seeing a revolution in terms of the manner and style of political mobilisation away from people and parties that represent towards styles and forms of politics that seek to draw attention to and contest injustices.

¹⁴ Pierre Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008.

¹⁵ Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*, Polity, Cambridge, 2012; Carole Cadwalladr, ‘Inside Avaaz—Can Online Activism Really Change the World?’, *The Observer*, 17 November 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/nov/17/avaazonline-activism-can-it-change-the-world>; Josep-Lluís Mico and Andreu Casero-Ripolles, ‘Political Activism Online: Organization and Media Relations in the Case of 15m in Spain’, *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 17, no. 7, 2014, pp. 858–71.

¹⁶ Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations*. Penguin, New York, 2008; Symon Hill, *Digital Revolutions: Activism in the Internet Age*, New Internationalist, Oxford, 2013; Paul Mason, *Why It’s Still Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions*, Verso, London, 2013.

Under second or reflexive modernity, activists seek out styles and forms of intervention that make a direct or immediate impact in the political field. We are moving from a politics that defends or sustains collective identities towards ‘individualised collective action’.¹⁷ Flash politics, immediate politics, sit downs, protests and demonstrations—actions such as these can be coordinated using ICT as opposed to the infrastructure associated with a political party with permanent offices, a bureaucracy, leaders and a division of labour. But what is becoming evident is that the progressive ease of organising and connecting to others is taking us well beyond a piecemeal style of activism that is content to influence what representatives do or say, usually termed ‘participation’ in the political science literature. Recent events in the Middle East, Spain, Turkey, Iceland and Brazil reinforce the sense in which we are beginning to see the emergence of styles of activism that are *insurgent* as well as reforming or participatory. Indeed this ‘connective’ logic now allows for an almost *constituting* energy to emerge in which citizens act collectively to overhaul their own systems of governance, to bring power closer to the populace, to combat opaqueness in decision-making as in the ‘pots and pans revolution’ in Iceland.¹⁸ So ‘combating injustice’ need not imply an issue-based politics or ‘social movement’ style of politics. It can, where appropriate, lead to a form of politics that seeks an overturning of existing institutions and processes in favour of something more democratic—*¡Democracia Real Ya!*

As citizens become emboldened to take more matters into their own hands, so those who are elected to represent them come to appear less as representatives and more as ‘politicians’, less like one of ‘us’ and more as one of ‘them’, part of the governing apparatus. As the distance develops between a governing apparatus and citizens, so the latter seem to become emboldened to recuperate their own voice, bypassing the traditional structures in favour of ‘post-representative’ initiatives, street initiatives, and latterly pop-up parties on an ‘easy come, easy go’ basis. In Spain, for example, 490 new political parties have been created since 2011.¹⁹ The common denominator? They are almost all parties of protest, anti-party parties, post-political parties: Facebook or Twitter creations with low start-up costs. Just as the internet is undermining the old bricks and mortar retail model, so it is undermining the bricks and mortar *political* model. Politics is becoming much more a ‘pick-up’, DIY,

¹⁷ Michele Micheletti (ed.), *Political Virtue and Shopping: Individuals, Consumerism and Collective Action*, Palgrave, New York, 2003.

¹⁸ W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, ‘The Logic of Connective Action’, *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 15, no. 5, April 2012, pp. 739–768.

¹⁹ Julie Cantalou, ‘The Spanish Slump—Political Crisis and the Need for Institutional Reform’, Friedrich Naumann Stiftung für die Freiheit, 17 June 2013, <https://fnf-europe.org/2013/06/17/the-spanish-slump-political-crisis-and-the-need-for-institutional-reform/>.

evanescent activity and much less a matter of choosing others to speak and act on our behalf.

Post-representative democracy?

How to characterise the present conjuncture? On the one hand, there is little threat to democracy either in normative terms or in terms of the ability of representative democratic systems to reproduce themselves. On the other hand, it is becoming clear that the classic party-based model of political representation is becoming exhausted. The represented increasingly feel less represented by the representatives. Politically active citizens increasingly want to speak and act in their own names and not just participate in little deliberative chambers, forums or assemblies designed to give them the impression of gaining ‘voice’. New tools, new repertoires of activism, engagement and mobilisation mean that citizens can organise beyond or outside the mainstream however defined.

Commentators such as Keane, Rosanvallon and Brito Viera and Runciman have remarked in an offhand way that the present moment is ‘post-representative’, and I think that this captures well where we have got to.²⁰ We cannot live with representative democracy, but nor it seems are we ready to move beyond it. We live in a kind of in-between world. One political logic seems exhausted, but there seems little sense of appetite for an alternative to representative democracy. Political theorists peddle their wares (‘strong democracy’, ‘associative democracy’, ‘deliberative democracy’, et cetera) to an audience that is, by and large, oblivious to the representations of intellectuals no matter how well meaning. The mood is not contemplative or deliberative. It is angry and resentful. It seeks to punish politicians, but not to overturn them or to transform democracy itself. Iceland’s revolution did not banish politicians so much as seek to remind them of their obligations and duties.

Many of Spain’s initiatives are in the name of a ‘second transition’, shorthand for a better, more sensitive model of representation than the blunt electoral system currently on offer. We are, as Rosanvallon notes, in the grip of ‘counter democracy’, a kind of massing of the citizenry against their representatives in a stance of suspicion, disdain and remonstrance. But citizens are not seeking power for themselves—yet.

This is not, however, to say that we are stuck in a kind of closed loop of a necessarily destructive kind. Many of the key initiatives we see around us are, I think, democratising. They are seeking to bring citizens closer to decision-making, to the power makers, to the point where they can make an impact. Many of these initiatives contest the basic coordinates that inform and underpin representative democracy: the

²⁰ Monica Brito Viera and David Runciman, *Representation*, Polity, Cambridge, 2008.

monopoly of power in the hands of a few, ‘the one per cent’; the secrecy and lack of transparency around how particular processes and institutions work; and the generalised sense of resentment about the direction in which global economic processes are unfolding.

‘Post-representative democracy’ may thus have the air of something transitional about it, but that does not mean that nothing is changing. On the contrary, the waning of the paradigm speaks to a certain recuperation of the sense of democracy as the affair of the *demos* themselves, not their representatives. It speaks to a recognition that noise, resonance, direct engagement on the streets, in the squares, outside parliaments is *part of* democratic life. As Ranciere points out, this sense of democracy being the affair of ‘anyone and everyone’ used to be held to be intrinsic to democracy—that is, before the guardians, technocrats and politicians took over.²¹ So this is less a crisis of democracy than a crisis of a particular iteration of *representative* democracy, a democracy of, by and for *politicians*. It is a crisis that may, ironically, be the condition of possibility for the return of some of those elements once held to be indispensable to democracy: dissensus, noise, politics and the direct involvement of *demos*, as opposed to those who would represent them.



Question — Today the High Court ruled that the changes to the voting system for the Senate are constitutional. I was wondering what you think the major parties will do to try to keep minor parties at bay. This was a reform to try to stop vote whisperers letting minor parties increase their representation in parliament. Do you think there are going to be other things the major parties try to do in the same vein?

Simon Torney — Are monopolies interested in preserving monopolies? They most certainly are. I am not sure I completely understand the Australian political system after seven years here. I am really looking forward to looking at that ballot paper. How many numbers? Where does it go? Up above the line or below the line? The one minor party that I know will get my vote is the Australian Cyclists Party because I am fed up with being knocked off Sydney’s roads!

To go back to the serious point, we call these kinds of parties ‘cartel parties’ for a reason—because they have stitched up the political system. The pendulum move between centre right and centre left is, of course, highly convenient for them. It is no surprise to me, and I suspect it is no surprise to you, that they will, by hook or by

²¹ Jacques Ranciere, *Hatred of Democracy*, Steve Corcoran (trans.), Verso, London, 2006.

crook, make it very difficult for new political parties to proliferate. In Britain it is exactly the same thing—very difficult for small parties, third parties, or the Green party to break through. Why? The British first-past-the-post system more or less rules it out. The only way in which that minoritarian vigour can come through here is, it seems to me, in the Senate. I think it would be a danger and would be wrong to try to close down the sense of the Senate being a place where you do hear odd voices, different voices and idiosyncratic voices.

There is a problem about how many votes it takes in order to get that kind of representation. There will be people here who know an awful lot more about this than me, but the thought that a mere 2,000 votes can get you a seat in the Senate in a country where there are 15 million people voting does sound very disproportionate, if that is the case. If you are going to have representation, it needs to be proportional and it needs to be organised in a way which does not lead to a kind of *Looney Tunes* politics as well, because I think that is also a frustration.

Whatever criticisms you have of parliamentary systems, having some clarity on what it is that the government is going to do without reference to all the particularistic needs of tiny minority parties is, I think, a source of stability. That is a very unfashionable view but I think, given the scale and the nature of the problems that confront national governments, some ability to see them in action doing things and then to hold them accountable is of the essence of the political system. That does not always seem to be apparent in the Australian system.

Question — For transparency, I am a Greens candidate for the federal election. Speaking as someone who is out there talking to people, doorknocking and doing all the traditional things as well as social media, there really seems to be a space, if not a vacuum, for connecting with people. I wonder if you are able to comment on that because people really are wanting to connect.

Simon Torney — Good luck to you. I think I am in one of the greenest constituencies of all in Balmain in Sydney. I look forward to seeing you on the streets. There are upsides and downsides here. What social media does is compress that sense of distance. If you see somebody's tweet, if you see someone's Facebook page, if you see the digital uploads of them in action, you think you have a little bit of a relationship there. What social media does is compress that space between us and representatives and that has an upside as well as a downside. The upside is clearly that you can engage your constituents, or your potential constituents, much more easily. You can put stuff out there. They can interact. They can tweet back, and I am sure they do. The downside is that we then engender a kind of illusion of proximity. This is something that Trump has done extremely well. It is almost that he is your friend, that he is your buddy, as he tweets out very pugnacious, provocative, and pungent

comments. He can position himself as one of us because he is connected, because he is making these kinds of pictures.

I think the dangers of populism actually are quite clear in ICT. I am very sceptical of the view that we should simply read ICT as a boon for democracy. It is also a boon for would-be demagogues and would-be monopolists of power, as I think Trump is. What he can do is say, 'That old order there, those political parties, they are not interested in connecting to you, they are not interested in hearing from you', and we know it is rubbish. Trump is not doing any of these tweets. He has an army of people he has paid for, as a billionaire, who are in a sense mobilising and manufacturing this kind of charismatic style of leadership. So there is an upside and a downside. I think we are in the very early phase of seeing how this is going to cash out.

If I were advising you on how to engage with your constituents, of course social media and ICT is going to be one of the ways you can extend your reach and get some echoes back as well. But you will also get a lunatic fringe. You will get that guy who tweets back on every tweet that you send out saying, 'You are talking rubbish. Drop it.' So you have to be a bit careful.

Question — From your description, we have at the moment one establishment form of representative government here in Parliament House, and another one out on the street. Is it appropriate or practical that there be leadership from this formal establishment to try to define a new social contract and its possible wiring diagram and its key aspects? Is that a role of leadership for this house?

Simon Tormey — I wish it were, but I think politicians like things as they are. There is this sense of the crisis, if you like, because politicians have been a bit slow in adapting to the need, the desire, the hunger of ordinary people to participate, to be part of decision-making and to be asked what they are thinking about things. Why? Because they are monopolists. If you are used to that sense of being the one in power, being the one who is accountable, that kind of noise from below can be a terrible distraction—'I am the one who has been elected to decide on development in Sydney, or in Canberra, not you guys.' The problem concerns the role of the politician. Is the politician just the avant-garde of the rest of the constituents, or is that person supposed to, in a sense, push the constituents away. This is actually an old debate in representative democracy. Edmund Burke wrote about this in reply to Thomas Paine in the 1780s: should a politician be a delegate or a representative? He said what marks out representative democracy is that we hear from the *demos* once every three or four years, not every day, not in a connected way, not in a participatory way, but you are the one who is accountable. In Spain there is a lot of interest in making politicians delegates—making them instantly recallable and enforcing laws such that they can

only stand once in an election so they do not become a kind of charismatic fulcrum for power and the people, the citizens, have a greater hold over them.

How much demand is there for participation, for extra engagement, for ordinary citizens to be involved or are people just too busy? We are here because we are enjoying the political discussion, but out there people are working, looking after children and so on. I think the answers are very contextual. In Spain everyone seems to be a politician and highly interested—taxi drivers will bore you to tears about the history of the Franco regime and so on. In Australia, what crisis? Yes, we do not have much trust, but the system operates, moves along, stuff gets done and people seem a bit happier here. It is a complex question.

Question — On the matter of the general citizen being involved, I wonder to what degree the capture of the political parties by professional politicians and staffers is an issue. I think there are cases not far from here where the governing committees of parties are staffed by a majority of MLAs and their staffers, which means the general person thinks, ‘If the matter is decided already, what is the point of the ordinary person getting involved?’ Do you have any comments on that?

Simon Torney — I do not think it is just staffers. I think those who work in this building, the lobbyists, the special interests, have a voice that we do not have. Why? Because we do not have money and we have not got resources and we have not got the kind of capital that interests politicians. So there is an inequality of voice; that is clearly the case and you have pointed to one particular instance of that. One of the issues about democracy is that, unless we hear more voices and unless more voices have a chance to participate, we will probably find either we are headed towards populism and towards the mediatisation of politics or we are going to have technocratic governance that operates behind our backs and without our input. That is not a good thing. These numbers are alarming at one level and I think we need to push back against that model of staffers or those kinds of monopolists propping up the cartel system. We need to be thinking a bit more about how we can hold politicians to account, not just once every three years or once every five years but on a daily basis. We need a vigorous press. We need a vigorous digitally-enabled voice, an echo chamber, for what people are thinking about. I think some of those developments are actually happening. I am encouraged by what I see in certain contexts, but in Australia I think we have got more work to do.

Question — You mentioned the greater online presence through social groups and the ridiculous ease of communication, and also figures like Donald Trump that represent a group that may not have had a voice before. This can be attributed to globalization and a new form of interconnectedness. Does globalization have a role in the decrease

of political interest as we are surrounded by global political issues rather than our own?

Simon Tormey — A very complex question that has stumped me completely! The global level actually is the thing that many of our young people are most concerned about—things like climate change, the erosion of species and global inequality. The problem is we do not really have developed institutions at the global level that help us to do anything other than to stimulate trade. We have this incredibly elaborate repertoire of mechanisms for freeing up markets, for capital flows and all the rest of it, but the politics has not followed the economics. I think this is really the kernel of your question. So much is going on at the global level and yet where are the global institutions which would permit that kind of conversation about how we get things to work much better? Has anyone heard from the UN recently? It seems quite extraordinary. For many decades that had the sense of a nascent global parliament but it seems to be completely moribund as an institution. In climate change talks there are subgroups of the UN which are acting and doing their work, but if you look at ISIS and global security issues, for example, I would have thought there would be a stronger and more resonant voice of the international community there. What is happening is that nation states are themselves trying to assert their own primacy—not just the US, but Russia, China and Europe—and this is creating a clamour which makes it very difficult for international global institutions to get any traction. I think it is for the next generation to push for that kind of international dimension, that global dimension. They do it. Some of the most powerful political communities are online communities—Change.org and Avaaz.org. GetUp! is an Australian thing but there are lots of online communities which are actually able to report some interesting successes across the globe. So I think there are tools being developed. I think voices are being heard, but there is an awful lot more to do and we need to think hard about how global governance is going to resolve some of the really major and terrible problems of the 21st century.