Democratic Equivocations:
Who Wants What, When and How?[*]

Patrick Bishop

Representative democracy, as it developed in Europe and the United States and in Australia, has defendable merits. Unless we realise its merits, we risk undermining it in the very attempt to improve it. Here I am evaluating not democracy as an ideal, or even an idea, but as it is practiced in Australia, and elsewhere, as representative democracy. This form of democracy is often disparaged as not 'true' democracy. In fact, representative democracy and its political practices come in for some pretty bad press, as irrelevant, self-serving and aloof from the people's wishes. Even those you'd expect to be its most staunch defenders equivocate. Most famously, Winston Churchill said of democracy: 'It is the worst form of government, aside from all the others that have been tried from time to time.' Hence my title *Democratic equivocations*.

Of course, it maybe that these 'equivocations' are its most enduring and endearing features—not for representative democracy the certainty that leads revolutionaries to their death at the barricades, or for that matter, the certainty that the trains run on time. The problem is if we don't understand what it is we value and why we value it we may lose it in our attempts at reform. My contention is that many new initiatives aimed at addressing perceived 'problems' of representative democracy rest on the unquestioned assumption of the desirability of more direct participation and a desire on the part of the people for more participation. Here I ask the question, when it

comes to involvement in democratic politics, who *really* wants what when and how? My argument will be that while representative government has certain participatory functions there are other functions that must remain the responsibility of the representatives. And that there is considerable evidence that the urge for increased participation in politics, in any general sense, is simply not there.

One way to answer the question of what the people want is to ask them. When we ask the people what they think of representative democracy, what do they say? Global surveys show that commitment to the institution of representative democratic government, internationally, is very high.

> The mean value for all 38 countries (in the *World Values Survey*) is 84 percent. Eleven countries, most of them Western European states, have over 90 percent support for democracy as a form of government, suggesting that experience with functioning democratic regimes, with all their blemishes, far from leading to cynicism and rejection, reinforces citizens' commitments to that ever more widely accepted form of government.[1]

To localise this claim, I can report that a recent survey in Queensland produced a similar result. When asked in a random phone poll if they were happy with democracy as a system of government, 78 percent of respondents said 'Yes'.

But there is a paradox when we look a little further. Even people who are critical of their regimes also value democracy as the best system of government. Hans-Dieter Klingemann identifies this group as 'dissatisfied democrats'—Pippa Norris calls them 'critical citizens'—those in surveys who 'put a high rating on the attractiveness of democracy as a form of government but at the same time place a low rating on the performance of their particular democratic regime.'[2] Understanding these 'dissatisfied democrats', I believe, will turn out to be an important exercise.

Eminent American political scientist Robert Dahl also draws attention to the fact that surveys repeatedly show that 'despite their disdain for some key democratic political institutions, citizens … continue to express high levels of support for democracy as a system.'[3] He suggests a follow up question be asked: 'What is it precisely people are supporting when they say they support 'democracy as a system'?'

In my survey in Queensland, I attempted to answer this by asking the question: 'How do you think the system of democracy could be improved?' Twenty-eight percent wanted more participation and 27 percent wanted more leadership from politicians!

---

[1] Hans-Dieter Klingemann, 'Mapping Political Support in the 1990s: a Global Analysis', in Pippa Norris, *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governance*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 4. Note here the equivocal mode—despite their experience of the system they accept it as a good form of government!

[2] Pippa Norris, ibid, p. 54.

[3] Robert Dahl, 'A Democratic Paradox?' *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 115, Spring 2000, p. 35.

Rather than following that tangled empirical path, I'm going to explore the nature of representative government, and its challenges, to see if we can map out a normative path for a better representative system in response to the current raft of concerns.

Problems for representative democracy

Representative democracy is prey to conflicting emotions: apathy and antipathy. Internationally, voter apathy as measured by voter turnout figures, and high informal votes raise questions about the legitimacy of elected representatives. Presidents who win (or lose depending on how you see the last US election result) with less than 50 percent of the potential vote struggle to retain legitimacy, based on popular support at the ballot box, at least. In Australia this problem is masked by our unusual system of compulsory voting, but the challenge is emerging here in the failure on the part of many young voters to register.

Public antipathy towards politicians is a perennial problem for representative democracy. Real scandals and fraud certainly do not help alter the popular image of the untrustworthy politician. But, leaving lurid stories aside, is there something in the nature of democratic politics itself that means even politicians *who are doing their job well* will often be accused of lying, or deception?

Declining social capital, following Robert Putnam's claim that demise in *private* participation is injurious to representative democracy,[4] poses a threat as the 'un-civic' generation fails to embed the institutions in the requisite net of social connectedness.

All these factors have led to the re-emergence of calls for direct democracy, a nostalgia for New England town meetings, or an electronic 'Athenian assembly', made inevitable by the rapid expansion of internet access. Now, the champions claim, is the time for 'true' democracy!

In advance of the imminent arrival of the new Athenians, a growing emphasis, by the media and politicians alike, is being placed on polling. While professional polling samples require few respondents to be 'statistically' useful, the opportunity to respond to a poll has multiplied with the '1-800' (telephone) and internet opportunities at the end of just about every commercial news bulletin and current affairs show, or even when you open up your home web page.

But responding to polling buys representatives back into the dilemma of antipathy. If policy follows the polls are they being democratic by accepting the wishes of the people or engaging in a cynical grab for power at the next election? If policy eschews poll results is it an example of sound leadership against the ill-informed 'mob' or the arrogance of the oligarchs?

All of these problems and their 'solutions' provide a challenge to current understandings of the role of the representative and representative institutions. First a little about what representation means and its key features.

---

[4] Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000.

Representation

The eighteenth century French philosopher Montesquieu was quite clear in delineating the competency of 'the people': 'The people are admirable for choosing those to whom they should entrust some part of their authority.' Basing their decisions on the 'facts' and evidence of their 'senses' they know very well a man's war record and are then quite capable of electing a general.[5] This competence does not extend to direct control over government. The people, while sufficiently capable to call others to account for their management, are not suited to manage themselves.

For Montesquieu what mattered was that public business should proceed at a pace that is neither too slow nor too fast. The trouble with 'the people' is that they always act too much or too little. 'Sometimes with a hundred thousand arms they upset everything; sometimes with a hundred thousand feet they move only like insects.'[6] Thus the 'bare economy' of the representative system is explained. The people have a say in matters they are competent to judge and public business is carried out expeditiously by elected officials, without what was often also the fear of the ancient philosophers, the excesses or inaction associated with direct rule by the people.

John Stuart Mill in his *Considerations on Representative Government* is more equivocal. He outlines representation as, even at best, a compromise. While he asserts 'the only government which can fully satisfy the social state, is the one in which the whole people participate',[7] practical necessity requires a representative body, whose functions he does not delimit, except with the proviso that the representative body has control of *everything in the last resort*.[8]

Even from J.S. Mill, the most influential architect of the idea of representative government, we have both the direct democratic urge and the practical reality requiring the representative body as the site for final judgement. Significant features of representative democracy are that: officials are elected the people are competent to choose them; the people are, in effect, incompetent to govern themselves; and while all should participate, control of everything in the last resort rests with the representative body.

Equivocation on the part of philosophical founders and political practitioners, even from the system itself, forms the backdrop to our investigations of both problems and solutions the system is said to face.

If what we are looking at rests on equivocal philosophical foundations, it is important that we get a clear understanding of the nature of the problems that have emerged in representative democracies.

---

[5] C.deS. Montesquieu. *The Spirit of the Laws*, A.M. Cohler, B.C. Miller and H.R. Stone, trans. and eds, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 11.

[6] ibid, p. 12.

[7] John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, [1861] 1994, p. 198.

[8] ibid, p. 213.

Voter apathy

Voter apathy becomes a problem in representative democracy when it raises questions about the legitimacy of its incumbents. However, when we hear slogans such as 'Don't vote, it only encourages them' or 'It doesn't matter who you vote for, a politician wins', it is not clear that apathy towards representative democracy is necessarily addressed by offering more opportunities to participate.

One argument, of course, is that apathy actually represents a tacit form of consent. The reasoning goes something like this: 'Politics does not impact on my life. Experience has shown me that whoever is in power will not materially affect my life and I choose to spend my time on other pursuits.' A potential voter thinking along these lines is certainly not looking for *more* involvement in politics.

A common argument against the vote is that a single vote doesn't have any effect. This seems to be challenged by recent close election results in the US and surprise results in a number of Australian states. The concept of the blue ribbon seat has certainly been undermined in Australia through a willingness of long-term Labor and Liberal voters to change their votes either between the major parties or to new political parties or independents. One cause of apathy might dissolve once voters see that their vote *can* make a difference.

Juxtaposed to an ideal of direct democracy, the vote has always looked insignificant. Rousseau famously saw the English as returning to bondage once their vote was cast. But especially where there is less certainty of results and less safe seats, the act of voting, rather than a trivial act of non-participation, becomes a highly significant participatory act. A vote, in fact, casts a long shadow in front of it. Importantly, the vote and the fact of the next election act as a continuous discipline on the elected, requiring them to give public account of their actions and to take constant notice of public opinion through its various channels of expression, such as media comment, opinion polls, party meetings and lobbying activity.[9]

The capacity for influence when voting, as a factor of time expended, is very high indeed. Voting delivers a considerable degree of control for a small outlay, to an extent that is liable to be overlooked if we concentrate on the act alone and ignore all that it causes to happen. In the emerging, more fluid, electoral climate a picture emerges of a 'stronger' democracy without a need to advocate full participatory practice or control of the agenda by the people.

The vote also reshapes political institutions. Prior to the introduction of proportional representation, party discipline had effectively removed the Senate's role in the scrutiny of legislation. It has been restored because some voters now choose not to vote for the same major party in both Senate and House of Representatives elections.

Antipathy towards politicians

To some extent, antipathy will forever be the lot of politicians. Out-and-out bad behaviour cannot be defended or condoned, but one of the most common accusations,

---

9 D. Beetham, 'Liberal Democracy and the Limits of Demcratization', in David Held, ed., *Prospects for Democracy*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1993, p. 64.

that we elect them to do one thing and they do another, goes to the heart of what we should and can expect from a representative system.

As Edmund Burke famously argued, democratic representatives are necessarily more than mere agents of the peoples' changing wishes. As he informed the electors of Bristol, 'your representative owes you not his industry alone but his judgement; and he betrays, instead of serving, you if he sacrifices it to your opinion.'[10]

Here we have a 'trustee' model of representation, in contrast to the 'agent' model I will outline later. The representative is charged with making the best decision in *consideration of the interests* of those he or she represents. Depending on how Burke's words are interpreted, however, they might imply a radical disconnection between the representative and those they represent. Political theorist Hannah Pitkin connects them in a conversation between representative and the represented, and says of the potential for the representative to be in conflict with the electorate:

> [t]he representative must act in such a way that there is no conflict, or that if it occurs an explanation is called for. He [or she] must not be found persistently at odds with the wishes of the represented without good reason in terms of their interest, without a good explanation of why their wishes are not in accord with their interests.[11]

This expresses clearly the need for public justification as part of the process of representation. I believe that this is the area where most attention is needed to address the concerns of 'dissatisfied democrats'.

The 'conversation' also identifies the 'expertise' of representatives—their capacity both to make and defend judgements. Thus my earlier point that representatives can sometimes generate antipathy towards their class by exercising the very skill we expect of them. A rejoinder from the representative might be—what should we do when the weight of the evidence causes us to change our view?

It is not, after all that the 'stuff' of politics is fixed. In a representative democracy, under a 'trustee' model of representation at least, it is incumbent on those who make the decisions to offer a public justification of why that decision was made.

Decline in Social Capital

Robert Putnam, billed as 'the most influential academic in the world today' on his visit to Australia in 2001, has placed a problem on the agenda of representative democracy. His claim is simple yet startling. He moves from the 'conventional claim that the health of American democracy requires citizens to perform our *public* duties' to a more expansive and controversial claim 'that the health of our *public* institutions

---

[10] Edmund Burke, 'Speech to the Electors of Bristol', in B.W. Hill, ed., *Edmund Burke on Government Politics and Society*, London, Fontana, [1774] 1975, p. 156.

[11] Hannah Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*, Berkeley, California, University of California Press, 1967.

depends, at least in part, on widespread participation in *private* voluntary groups— those networks of civic engagement that embody social capital.'[12]

All the empirical evidence Putnam can muster (and the study is one of the most comprehensive ever undertaken) shows that on all the indicators not only is the performance of public duties in decline but participation in private voluntary groups is also in a massive decline. If the correlation established in previous work by Putnam between the health of public institutions and voluntary activity is correct then the continued function of those public institutions are indeed under threat.

Here I am not going to develop an argument about whether Putnam is right in his claim, but look how governments have responded, or can respond, to it.

At first glance the nature of the problem seems to limit the role government can play. In a democratic society it clearly cannot coerce people to once again go bowling in leagues, attend PTA meetings or join bridge clubs. Indeed, if, as I think it is in Putnam's argument, the private nature of these associations is an important factor here, the government cannot have a role. Government-created social capital seems either an oxymoron or something we might expect from a totalitarian regime—one could argue that the STASI in Romania, where half the population spied on the other half, had high levels of social capital.

Where I think representative government does have a role draws on the distinction Putnam makes between 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital. 'Bonding' social capital is that which draws people who are alike together—a shared interest, ethnicity and so on; 'bridging' social capital brings people together who are different. And I think bridging social capital can actually best be done, not by governments, but through shared participation in political processes. In fact, I would argue that bridging social capital emerges in elections. An election is one of the few times in a modern, complex, multi-ethnic society, with differences between city and regions or rural communities, when we can define a single community—those who collectively participate in the electoral process.

For representatives the message is clear. There is a need for them to respect the process, not by acquiescing to the will or whim of a majority, but by offering public justification for the choices they have been *entrusted* to make. And I will draw this point out further as I discuss the role of technology in all this.

Technological determinism

The new technology of the internet and the rapid growth in home internet access features in suggested reforms to representation. Beyond addressing some of the problems identified above, it is seen by some as presaging an age of 'true' direct democracy.

Governments were relatively slow in adopting the new technology but, especially in Europe, interactive government websites have become standard features. The Austrian Government's *Help Gv* site, for example, receives nearly three million 'hits' per

---

[12]   Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, op. cit., p. 336 (emphasis in the original).

month across its three levels of government.[13] The site not only provides information but also the capacity to pay license fees, speeding tickets and application forms for all government services. What they do not currently do is seek advice from the community on matters of policy, or operate an on-line democratic forum.

A recent and bold experiment by Australian MP Mark Latham offered a form a direct participation in policy formulation via the representative. A series of questions were posted on a website and the electorate was asked whether they supported or rejected the proposal. In effect the site made the representative a true agent of his electorate. It is a fascinating experiment because it highlights some of the issues that the new technology raises and, I think, reveals that the technological availability of such a system alone does not determine its desirability.

In this experiment a response rate of about 250 per question was achieved, from 1000 registered participants. I don't know of other MPs who have attempted this experiment, but this is also about the level of interest that questions generate on the Australia-wide *Vote.com* site which undertakes to send results to the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. While Latham's stated aim was to achieve a much higher response rate, he nonetheless met his stated obligation to follow the wishes of his electorate. The result of the first ballot set him at odds not only with his own views but with party policy.

Here the experiment runs squarely into two related problems. What constitutes the wishes of the electorate? Once such is determined, what is the obligation on the representative, as 'agent', as opposed to 'trustee', to deliver it?

The agent model, while seeking to be more democratic, inevitably supports only a majority. In the case of the Latham experiment this could have been as few as 126 members in the electorate. A greater response, however, would not resolve the dilemma if the representative *in exercising their judgement* finds the majority view at fault. The advantage of the trustee model is that the representative is seen as having that trust from *all* the electorate as determined at the last election *and* re-evaluated at the next.

The new technology may prove a boon to government service delivery. The Austrian results show a willingness on the part of the people to use it for government service delivery. The desire of the people to participate in matters of policy, even when it offers the direct capacity to influence the representative, is currently very low. The experiment shows that governments should think carefully before using popular government information and service delivery sites as mechanisms for policy determination. It could either destroy the capacity of representatives to make judgements or it will set up expectations of direct control that cannot be met in a representative system.

Conclusion

The parameters for addressing voter apathy, antipathy towards politicians and a perceived decline in public trust are clearly set. There appears to be is no general push

---

[13]   www.help.gv.at/

for a fully participatory democracy. Rather, there is considerable scope for, and in existing democracies, a body of citizens (the 'dissatisfied democrats') willing to assist in reform of the practices of representative government. Such a reform process could bring the people's satisfaction with the performance of their government into line with their overwhelming commitment to democracy as the best system of government. And here I'll offer my equivocation—the gap, of course, should never completely close for surely one measure of the health of a democracy is its capacity to accept dissent.

So a tentative answer to my question: Who wants what, when and how?

The people want representative government to continue. I cannot find a push for direct democracy in the World Values survey or the small survey I undertook in Queensland. My own view is that many of the concerns of 'dissatisfied democrats' would be addressed by better performance by the representatives in the current system, in particular in the area of public justification—completing what should a reasonable conversation between citizens and their representatives about political issues and outcomes.

There is clearly a need to address these issues now. The problems need to be seen in the manner I have explored them today, through their impacts on representative democracy rather than in response to an ill-defined, or technologically determined call that now is the time for direct democracy.

As for how this is to be done, I would argue that the new technological options should all be considered for the potential they offer for the kinds of improvement I've outlined. For example, to what extent can the new technology be used to improve the capacity of *representatives* to take into account the variety of views of the people (as some form of consultative process, for example) but also as an unmediated mechanism for *justifying* why decisions were taken? We need to be wary, in particular that technological possibilities alone do not drive us towards delivering expectations of direct democracy when the aim is to improve current representative practice.

Better and more frequent public justification on the part of the representatives is also more consistent with current institutional arrangements, which seem, according to the available empirical evidence, to have general community support. Giving over representative responsibility to claims of the need for more direct participation seems a much more risky strategy.

While I said at the outset that the champions of representative democracy are hard to find, there are exceptions. Nobel laureate Amataya Sen, in a newspaper article marking the new millennium, said, unequivocally, that it was the 'best invention of the twentieth century'. He may be right, but I see it as an invention that by its very nature, seems more in tune with equivocal support—not claiming to be the best, but offering a reasonable track record at keeping the worst at bay. According to the survey evidence, the people seem to agree with that.

Question — How do you square your defence of Burke's notion of trustee representation with the strict parties that have arisen since Burke's time?

Patrick Bishop — The party system is often criticised. A view has developed that while we elect a local representative, that representative has to 'toe the party line'. It seems to me, though, that the political parties still need to justify themselves. If a representative is going to support the party line, they still have to publicly justify that position. If they just say that they are doing it to keep up the numbers, then they are not completing their side of the public conversation. Of course, the party system causes an even bigger problem for representatives who see themselves as agents, as Mark Latham found out when it was suggested that, if he disagreed with his party, he should cross the floor.

Question — It seems to me that if you are strongly supporting the trustee notion of representation, we really need to move to a much more 'multi-party' system, where you can have much more choice as to whom you decide to give your trust. Would you agree with that, and support proportional representation for the lower house as well as the Senate?

Patrick Bishop — Proportional representation might assist, but I think it would be wrong to see our two, or a two-and-a-half party system, as excluding multiple views. There are often heated discussions between factions! So, while parties might operate as a block in the Parliament, the political process is hardly solidaristic. I think also we live in a time of greater voter volatility, which makes the process more dynamic. As Dean Jaensch said, Australians seemed to be born with a voting gene— our DNA tells us that we are going to vote Labor or Liberal. It seems that 'genetic manipulation' is happening here and now when it comes to people's voting choices!

Question — I want to put the notion that representative democracy can be wider than parliament. In Australia—unlike Britain—Parliament is not supreme, but is limited by the Constitution. In the last episode of severe action by a governor-general, Parliament was dismissed. Looking at that situation, I want to suggest that the notion of representation should include a head of state who is elected, if we're going to define democracy as, in our system, representing the people. Can you comment on that proposition?

Patrick Bishop — I think the proposition of an elected president, rather than a governor-general, is part of a push for a more democratic system, but it's been directed more towards a disappointment with the current structures. The campaign against the republic was run on the basis that there was a danger that it would become a 'politicians' republic, and the contra-notion to that was that it would be more democratic if we could elect our own president. It seems to me that this buys us into a whole new level of politics, and that the representation there would be in a single person, rather than in the multiplicity of electorates that we have now. I am not sure that it would actually address your concern that a healthy democracy requires many different voices.

Question — I agree that the political strains or tensions that are evident now would be added to by having an elected president, but I don't think that should be the central issue in considering this proposal. It seems to me that if the existing constitutional powers of the governor-general could be exerted by an elected president—that is, to advise the executive and to warn them and, ultimately, where the Constitution has been severely breached, dismiss the prime minister—we would begin to have more of a genuine separation of powers at that level than we do at the moment. I'm not trying to be party political about the present situation, it could easily occur with a change of government. I believe we have an opportunity not only to build on the tradition of the governor-general—that was built on perhaps by Governor-General Deane when he ventured into the arena—but to take that further by basing the authority of an elected president on the fact of popular support and on the fact that an elected president could not be dismissed at an instant's notice.

Patrick Bishop — It is interesting that you talk about reform of an institution and then relate it back to a particular occupant, such as Sir William Deane. We need to be careful when looking at institutional change. In a particular instance we seem to have the kind of leader we might want as a president. But if there was another, different, incumbent, would you want to change the institution in the same way? Similarly with the changed role of the Senate: The Democrats or the Greens in the 'balance of power' role might appeal to some, whereas One Nation might have had less appeal You have to be careful when you alter an institution that you are not just thinking of the current events, but that you are also thinking of how that institution is going to operate over time. It is a complex process.

Question — The example that you gave concerning Mark Latham raises the old issue of whether you have a representative or a delegate. When you elect a certain person, he represents himself as having a range of views. To take a current issue, such as whether a lesbian is entitled to have IVF—suppose the person you have elected says they are Catholic with certain views, and on the other hand they have polled their electorate and discovered that a majority take a different view. What is his or her duty? Is it to follow what the public in their electorate advocates, or is it to follow their own conscience? Where do you place the situation of a delegate against that of a representative? What is the duty of a representative?

Patrick Bishop — In the kind of improved system that I'm trying to map out here, my position would be that the decision would be made by the representative, but it would be an obligation on the part of the representative to *justify* why that decision was made. On that particular issue you would get a range of views, and some of them would be out-and-out prejudiced, or prejudiced simply because some people have not thought about this sort of thing. You could also have a range of views based on either religion or on beliefs about sexuality and so forth. The representative is in a position to make that decision. Under our current system, of course, the party will probably direct him or her on what decision to make, unless it is a conscience vote.

Interestingly enough, Mark Latham, on his web site, said he wasn't asking for community input on economic issues, as they were too hard for people to understand. Instead he was going to stick to easy issues, like ones that require moral evaluations!

While he may have thought these were less controversial, his first poll showed other wise.

The obligation of the representative, as I'm mapping out here, is to justify why a decision was made. In some cases it may persuade people whose initial response was to say, 'No' to realise that there was a reason behind that decision that they hadn't considered. In the conversation, the representative can actually persuade people that they may have actually been wrong. If you have a delegate version, the majority—by definition—always wins.

Question — Is the internet going to take over altogether?

Patrick Bishop — I hope not. I'm worried about precisely that. If the internet takes over altogether, we dispense with parliament and with any checks. We all vote on a Friday night that we want this and don't want that and it becomes law by Monday morning. That is a frightening prospect.

Question — I'd like your comments on the availability of information. The 1970s were the high tide of Australian enthusiasm for access to information about what government is doing and has done and intends to do. You'd have to say the tide has receded considerably since then. The ability to make a considered judgement on any of these matters depends on not having the daily headlines dominated by one or two subjects, but spread over a much wider range. Also on having reasonably ready access on a whole range of subjects which the citizen might wish to identify as of interest, rather than those of people who are selling a million newspapers.

Patrick Bishop — I would agree. I'm mapping out something that is a conversation between people who have different levels of knowledge. But within a conversation like that, if the representative is going to justify their position they have to provide information that is going to support it. I don't think they can hide behind 'commercial-in-confidence' or assertions that the people can't be told now but will be told later. That kind of thing is not going to assist a process of public justification, which is where I think the representative conversation has to be improved.

I had a simple experience of this situation. The Queensland Government has regional forums, where ministers talk directly to interested members of the community. I was visiting one of these forums at Ipswich and the previous meeting had set up a couple of requests to government. It was up to the minister to report on what had happened. One request from the community had been successful and the minister was able to explain why it had been successful – generally a good news story. The minister responded to the other request by saying: 'I'm sorry. I know you wanted this, but you can't have it.'

It struck me that at that point that the people at the meeting did not immediately get up and start pulling the room apart, because he also included *why* they couldn't have it— an explanation and a public justification. I thought that was something that we don't see enough of in the political process.

My worry is that people might think that, if we had a full electronic direct democracy, it would solve the alienation problem. I think that it would bring with it far more problems, so I'm identifying public justification as probably a better avenue for politicians to overcome alienation and loss of trust. Politicians depend on the people retaining faith in the system. If people stop voting in elections or stop taking them seriously, they have a real problem.

Question — What you have just said raises the issue of compulsory voting. Given our history, what effort or impact would the removal of that compulsion have? Would those who are disaffected—the cynics—happily go home and forget about it, or would they, paradoxically, feel disenfranchised?

Patrick Bishop — It is an unusual circumstance in Australia that we have compulsory voting. I think the number of people who are not registering to vote is a significant issue now in Australia, and the general disenchantment felt toward political processes that we see in surveys of young children is also a problem.

I used to work in local government in New South Wales when voting wasn't compulsory, and nobody used to vote. Then when it became compulsory, everybody voted. It does get people out to participate. There are benefits in people participating in voting, as I have said before. It might be one of the few times when we can identify ourselves as a single community. I suppose I see compulsory voting as an Australian political fact that we have to build into our explanations of political behaviour in Australia. But I'm not a strong advocate for or against it.

Question — Could a government not use the Mark Latham experiment as an example of a way to introduce a greater opportunity for people to participate in the decision-making process, but say up front: 'These are the kinds of problems that come from using this forum for people to express their views. We don't guarantee to slavishly follow the majority position, but we'll use it as a more organised and efficient way of hearing what people have to say, rather than perhaps attending talkback radio sessions'?

Patrick Bishop — What interested me in this area was the study I had done on consultation practices—which is, consulting in the context of a representative democracy. One of the problems consultation practices run up against is if it develops an expectation that your representatives will act as your agents—and the Latham experiment was set up in precisely that way. I think there is a positive benefit in all these consultation practices. The danger of setting it up in that 'yes/no vote', '57 percent of people wanted this and 43 percent didn't' sort of way, is that the result can be interpreted to suit your purposes. It can either be used to say 'I am with the people here', or it can be used to say 'The people haven't got a clue and I am being the great leader.'

Just recently, the Australian Prime Minister has used the polls to justify a policy position, and also disparaged the polls to say why he was not going to do something. I'm not picking on him—of course, that's what all political leaders will do. But you have to throw yourself back on the question of what we are talking about when we get these kinds of undifferentiated yes/no votes.

The problem with the 1-800 number poll at the end of *A Current Affair,* for example, is that I don't think I have ever seen one of them where I haven't been able to predict what the result will be. You just know that the people who are irate about the issue are going to ring in and the people who are apathetic are not going to ring in. You can predict the result by the way that the story has been told. The danger is that that result then becomes a 'fact', and those kinds of facts can be dangerous.

Question — I am interested in the relationship between the manifestations of social capital that you talked about on the trustee representative model—particularly in terms of bridging social capital, if you have good examples of how it may have been used to sway opinion. Typically in local government we see those parochial concerns that gather around school closures or road locations and so on, and there is probably good evidence that they do affect the political process, but what about on a larger scale?

Patrick Bishop — The curious thing with the Putnam thesis is that he doesn't actually make the direct connection between people meeting in bridge clubs or going to PTA meetings, and the strength of the political process. The point of his study is that it seems that this activity in the private sphere creates a kind of network in which better understandings of representative democratic institutions are also developed— one is dependent on the other but they do not actually directly influence each other. There is no causal link established. In his studies in Italian communities, people who sang in choirs, for example, developed a high level political participation which in turn meant that the political institutions functioned well. So you can only tease out what *might* be the causal links.

Certainly, in the Australian context, governments—despite the reform processes of the last 20-odd years—are still seen by the people as having a role to play if something is going wrong. I've seen government agencies that think: 'If there is declining social capital, we'd better go out there and build it up.' But the argument is actually showing that governments can't build it. If governments are going to do anything in the social capital area, they might treat it almost like an environmental impact statement, by asking: 'Before we go in and institute this government program, what is the existing social capital we need to take account of that we might actually destroy by implementing such and such a program?' It's quite a subtle difference.