A big idea: A national holiday to talk politics

Max Rashbrooke is a research associate at Victoria University of Wellington's Institute for Governance and Policy Studies, and has recently published the report Bridges Both Ways: Transforming the openness of New Zealand government (http://igps.victoria.ac.nz/publications/publications/show/377). This article sets out the fourth of five ‘big ideas’ drawn from the report, with the final one to follow next week.

Many people want to know more about what’s going on in politics, take part in political discussions and vote in a more informed way – but lack the time, energy and space for it. And that’s understandable. With a record number of families having both parents in work, and New Zealand having long working hours in general, it isn’t easy to carve out time to think about the issues.

It’s also not something that everyone can do without a supportive environment. In the past many people were members of groups – such as churches or trade unions – where politics were regularly discussed. Those groups provided a bridge between individuals and the often complex and confusing world of current events. They created a space in which people could see politics being ‘done’ and in which they could take their first steps in that arena – but have significantly stopped performing that role.

All of which means we should think about ways to create new spaces and opportunities for people to discuss the big issues. One idea for doing that has been advocated for many years by two American scholars, Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin. They call it Deliberation Day (http://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300109641/deliberation-day) and the idea is that around two to three months before every general election, there could be a public holiday dedicated to discussing politics and the upcoming vote.

A New Zealand version, which we might call a Kōrero Politics Day, would
ideally be marked by community events and working bees, town hall meetings, festivals that combine music and politics, and other gatherings designed to foster discussion. On the model of the annual Neighbours Day Aotearoa (http://neighboursday.org.nz/), every community could be given a small amount of funding to put on an event that would bring people together to discuss the issues. The idea would be to make talking about politics interesting or even, dare one say it, fun. Working it in around community events would also help make it more natural – a chance to chat while doing something together, rather than an excessively formal ‘debate’.

While political participation on the day could not, of course, be enforced – no more than people can be forced to think about the Treaty on Waitangi Day – it is likely that a well-designed set of events, strong institutional support and public pressure would help create a culture of engagement.

All of this would underline the importance of politics, give people time and space to think about issues, and encourage a more reflective citizenship – and therefore better political campaigning. The kind of campaigning that parties do typically responds to where they think the voters are at and how deeply they engage with the issues. Better informed voters would encourage campaigning that focuses more on the issues and less on the substance.

While political participation on the day could not, of course, be enforced – no more than people can be forced to think about the Treaty on Waitangi Day – it is likely that a well-designed set of events, strong institutional support and public pressure would help create a culture of engagement. As Ackerman and Fishkin have argued, evidence from deliberation-based events shows that “the public has the capacity to deal with complex public issues; the difficulty is that it normally lacks an institutional context that will effectively motivate it to do so”.

Since New Zealand elections typically happen in spring, a holiday a few months earlier would provide a much-needed break in the middle of winter.
The Kōrero Politics Day could, as above, take place only in election years, but could also happen every year to emphasise all the important political discussions that go on outside of election campaigns.

An extra holiday would of course increase costs for business. But it would only bring New Zealand up to the G20 average of 12 statutory holidays a year (http://www.onrec.com/news/statistics-and-trends/ukhas-), well below countries such as Finland on 15, so it doesn’t seem an excessive burden. And New Zealanders already work long hours: the main cause of the country’s relatively poor economic performance is not time away from work but a failure to be efficient and productive while people are at work.

An alternative with lower business costs would be to designate a Saturday or Sunday as the Kōrero Politics Day – but that might be underselling the importance of politics. New Zealanders often begrudge spending money on their democracy, but it’s actually one of the key underpinnings of our lives, and should be invested in. We don’t expect houses to last well if they’re built cheaply. So why should we expect our democracy to work well if we’re not willing to spend some money on it? A day for talking about politics would symbolise our commitment to this fundamental aspect of our lives – and go some way towards improving the standard of democratic debate in this country.

Read more by Max Rashbrooke


- A big idea: Let the public vote on council budgets (https://www.newsroom.co.nz/2017/07/09/37756/a-big-idea-let-public-vote-on-council-budgets)

- A big idea: Let citizens draw up DIY Budgets (https://www.newsroom.co.nz/@boardroom/2017/07/20/39356/a-big-idea-let-citizens-draw-up-diy-budgets)

Comments

Newsroom does not allow comments directly on this website. We invite all readers who wish to discuss