

Deliberative democracy gets my vote

Politics has grown stultified in the hands of the political classes. This weekend, Power2010 sets about returning it to the people



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guardian.co.uk, Saturday 9 January 2010 10.00 GMT

The party leaders began this election year with bold talk of change, renewal, and new starts as they tried to put the expenses scandal and the annus horribilis of 2009 behind them. It seemed almost enough to make one think this election could be the one where the landscape shifts.

Almost. But the squabbling, plotting and point scoring that has dominated politics this week showed that we are still in the land of business as usual. When you strip away the rhetoric, where is the new politics, the big idea, the radical change that will inspire new confidence in our democracy?

David Cameron has promised us a new policy announcement a week until the election; you can be sure that the others will be at least as frenetic. But apart from the odd nudge and wink about an alternative voting system there is little to excite voters whose increasingly common response is to shrug and say of their elected representatives, "They're all as bad as each other". Although the promises might win popularity contests, where is the real engagement in trying to outdo one another with weekly pledges to cut taxes, abolish quangos or send more helicopters to Afghanistan?

This old-style top-down approach to campaigning, repackaging ideas and presenting them as radical plans seems to be the only way our current politicians know how to do politics. We need to stop the tub thumping and listen to how ordinary people want their democracy to function.

This weekend – 9 and 10 January – presents a perfect opportunity to do just this. On Saturday, Power2010 will bring together 200 people, representative of the UK as a whole, to debate and define a manifesto for democratic reform, seizing an historic opportunity to reshape the way we are governed.

This is the second stage of what is becoming the UK's greatest ever democratic brainstorm, through which Power2010 has generated nearly 4,500 submissions for reform from ordinary citizens since September 2009. This weekend, the maestro of deliberative democracy, Professor James Fishkin of Stanford University, will work with the delegates to help them agree their top ideas from those submitted. Fishkin's methodology has been developed over almost two decades and has been used in the US, Canada, Japan, Greece, Poland, Japan, the EU and now in China to engage the public in crucial decision-making. His political science colleagues back in California will work through Sunday night to provide the results of the deliberative process back to us here in the UK.

This is the first time a deliberative poll has been undertaken where the ideas were set by the people. And after the event, the top priorities will be put back out to the public for them to vote on. The ultimate choices will form a pledge, which every general election candidate will be asked to support, to ensure the next parliament is a reforming one.

So if people want fixed-term parliaments, then that is what we will put into the pledge; or if they want a ban on high donors funding political parties, the would-be politicians will be asked to commit to making this happen. And so the list will go on.

As a citizen, I ask myself, what would I prefer? To be told week after week by party leaders what will be good for the country and by implication good for me? Or to sit down with other members of the public, argue, debate, then finally agree what the issues are, and then together work out the best way to solve them? We have to find new ways of engaging people in politics; an invitation to vote every four or five years is not enough. Leaving it to the political class to decide the rules of the game, the shape and workings of our political system is not good enough.

It's a no-brainer. And since our politicians are citizens too, it should be a no-brainer for them. Let's forget the phoney war, and make 2010 a real year of political and democratic change.