

Demonstrable benefits of deliberative democracy

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From Mr Carne Ross.

Sir, In citing the arguments of Paul Romer, Sebastian Mallaby suggests that we can dispense with democracy in order to provide “good governance” and thus promote development (“[Future cities need to hand over the keys](#)”, February 4). While no one can dispute that good government – clear enforceable rules, property rights, credible dispute resolution and so on – fosters development, it is taking the argument too far to suggest that in undeveloped countries, such an environment may only be provided by “charter cities” run by “technocratic viceroys”. The opposite case can be made: that, in fact, much more democracy is the answer.

The necessary institutions of representative democracy – government, courts, civil society – are weak or corrupted in many countries, and not only undeveloped ones. And indeed it may well be that in certain societies, the “western model” of parliaments and executives may be too corruptible to be effective. But the answer is not autocracy, but more popular participation in decision-making.

The so-called “Porto Alegre experiment” in Brazil has shown clearly that massively increased participation in decision-making, where literally tens of thousands of local people debate and decide on budgetary priorities, has demonstrable benefits in fostering economic development, according to a World Bank study. The work of Stanford University’s Prof James Fishkin has demonstrated the benefits of so-called “deliberative democracy” in other contexts, in contrast to the increasingly corrupt and conflictual character of many representative systems, including in our own ostensibly democratic countries.

Rather than promote what is essentially a neo-colonial proposal – that undeveloped countries be governed by outside autocrats – Mr Mallaby and Prof Romer might instead consider the more positive democratic examples from Porto Alegre and elsewhere.

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