

Out of the ruins

By John Lloyd
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It was a beautiful early summer morning in Athens, and James Fishkin was showing me around the sites where democracy was born, nearly two and a half millennia ago. Dressed in shorts, a floppy white hat, trainers and a T-shirt commemorating the 25th-anniversary get-together of the Princeton Class of '71, the customarily enthusiastic Fishkin was even more so than usual, discoursing in full professorial mode - assisted in this by a full, greying beard - as we walked about the ruins and the statues. The previous evening, George Papandreou, the former Greek foreign minister, now leader of the opposition, had told him he had pioneered an innovation that might revolutionise world politics. Even by his own more modest lights, he had just pulled off a remarkable event. He had caused around 150 Greeks, randomly chosen, few with any marked interest in public affairs, to spend some 12 hours on a fine Sunday doing intensive politics. Fishkin had just exported democracy - to its fountainhead.

"Here's the bouleuterion," he said, as we walked through the stumps of pillars that marked out what had once been a sizable council hall. "Now here, a group of 500, randomly selected from the demes, the artificially created tribes of Athens, met - over a whole year! They selected a group of men from each of the demes; and then a smaller group would act as a kind of standing inner council, meeting in the tholos over here" - he marched over to a circle of stumps enclosing a much smaller space - "and here they would live, eat and sometimes sleep, discussing particular issues and projects, for a month. Then up there" - pointing to a large area up a slight slope - "that's the pnyx, where 6,000 Athenians, a 10th of the free males eligible to vote here, met to hear reports back from the council in the bouleuterion. James Madison, in one of the Federalist Papers [the essays written by the main framers of the US Constitution], said that the trouble with Athenian democracy was that they didn't have a senate, elected and representative, which could provide continuity and represent all of the people. But see, when you broaden the scope of voting, you lessen the incentive for deliberation."

Fishkin, a political scientist at Stanford University in California and the University of Texas, is a man seized with a big idea, which he believes is large enough to be of global importance. He thinks that this idea - which goes by the name of deliberative democracy - addresses one of the large public anxieties of our times: the rapidly eroding popular support for the main variants of democratic politics, evidenced by a decline in voting, in party membership, activism and loyalty, in interest in public affairs in the news media, in trust in politicians and in democratic institutions.

The idea came to him in 1987, when he was on a sabbatical year from the University of Texas in Austin. He was asked to introduce a colleague at a seminar to discuss the latter's book, which described the "momentum" effect on public voting intentions caused by the results of early primaries in Iowa and New Hampshire, the states on which there is the most ferocious media attention, precisely because of the assumption that others will tend to vote the way they do. He found himself thinking that this lemming effect, established early in a voting process that would ultimately chose the US president, was a bad way to run a democracy. In part inspired by the example of Athens, he began to work out what that better way might be.

The Athenian system of democracy was one of the least delegated the world has seen. It existed for about a century, from the 5th to the 4th century BC. It depended on a non-permanent body of citizens, in full assembly comprising a 10th of the eligible citizens (not slaves, women or immigrants), who were paid for their attendance at the bouleuterion, the tholos and the pnyx, thrashing out problems, projects and ideas over weeks and months. The decisions of the assemblies and - often more powerfully - the citizen juries, were often not in accordance with what liberals might see as desirable outcomes. Famously, they voted to put Socrates to death and to slaughter the inhabitants of Mitylene - though in the latter case, further debate the next day reversed the decision, and a speedy messenger got the revised vote to the Athenian military in time. There was no such change of heart on the decision to attack Sicily - one which ultimately doomed Athens to defeat. As the British political philosopher John Dunn writes (in *Setting the People Free*, 2005), the message that the great minds of the time - Plato, and to a lesser extent Aristotle and the historian Thucydides - transmitted to those who would in the future wrestle with the concepts of popular power was of a system "disorderly, unstable and intensely dangerous... a paradise, especially, for orators (or those who fancied themselves as such) and also in effect a form of tyranny by orators: of subjection against one's will to the force of others, not of the better argument but of the more potent speech."

"The clever people of the time didn't think much of [the system]," said Fishkin. Plato was famously dismissive of it: and in his comedy *The Wasps*, Aristophanes mocks the people of the assembly for being ignorant and poor, only doing it because they needed the money. For all its faults, though, the system did get people - many of them poor - engaged. "They talked all the time for a year!" said Fishkin, as we poked about the ruins. "They were living together."

This was what he was after: something that gave ordinary people - distracted, or busy, or bored, or cynical - both a spur and a stake. Bit by bit, the idea of "deliberative polling" emerged. Fishkin, together with a fellow University of Texas professor, Robert Luskin, mapped out a project that would use established social science techniques to choose a representative sample from a given area - locality, region, state. It would bring the group together for relatively extended periods to be briefed on issues and hear arguments for and against. They would discuss these at length among themselves and, finally, vote.

The system, written up in academic papers, began to attract attention. Two quite different institutions were persuaded to give it a chance. The first was the Public Utility Commission of Texas. Fishkin set up a series of deliberative meetings with Texans on the sources of power - and found, counter-intuitively in a state thought to believe in the near-divinity of oil, that after discussion the sample thought that more power should come from renewable resources. The commission took the consultation seriously to the point where it now derives much more of its energy from renewables.

The second experiment came when he was a visiting fellow at Cambridge. In 1994, he persuaded Channel 4 to do a short series of deliberative polls on television - again, by selecting groups of citizens representative of (in this case) the nation, and putting to them often hot issues for their deliberation. The first politician to address the deliberators was a young front-bench opposition spokesman on home affairs, Tony Blair.

In the past decade, deliberative democracy has been put to work in diverse circumstances - sometimes as a made-for-television exercise, sometimes as a consultative project, designed to let the authorities test the popular mood. The latter included gatherings in Australia on attitudes to keeping the monarchy and, in Denmark, on the adoption of the euro. Last year in Zeguo, a constituent township of the Chinese city of Wenling, near Shanghai, some 250 citizens voted how to spend the RMB49m (about £3.3m) public works budget - calling for a sewage treatment plant and a park, but against a public square and more roads. The results were submitted to the town's official people's congress, which voted the same way.

This has been the history of deliberative democracy as it grew, in the past two decades, from a professorial brainwave to its own version of smoke-filled rooms. However stimulating the gatherings, they have always been subaltern to the "real thing": either the votes of the people at various levels in a democracy - or, in the case of China, the rule of the Communist party. The kind of thing politicians might say was "fascinating" - as did Tony Blair in 1994 - then pass back to the business-as-usual matter of harrowing votes from an increasingly disengaged public. It has needed to take another step - a giant one, in the practice of democratic politics - from advisory to binding. And this it did, on a fine summer's weekend in Athens.

Don't look at me," said the chairman. "I don't know what you want to ask. You must ask yourselves what you want to ask." There was a disconsolate pause. "Well," said one woman, "what about the shopping mall? We should ask them what they are going to do about the mall."

The scene was one of about 10 sessions going on simultaneously in windowless rooms at the Helleppo Conference Centre in Marousi on the first Sunday in June. Marousi is a suburb of Athens with its own mayor and council - and the site of much of the infrastructure for the 2004 Olympics. As the discussions gathered steam in the smoke-filled rooms, much was said about the mall, and the Olympic infrastructure - little of it positive. Winning the Olympics is supposed to bring great benefits, but the experience of Marousi gives pause to the automatic assumption of an infusion of wealth and services - at least, so some Athenians think. Thanks to Fishkin and his collaborators, these Athenians now know what a number of their fellow citizens think.

"What about the mall?" said a man. What can be done with it? Are they going to tear it down? No! It's going to stay, and that's it. We should ask about something else."

"Ask about the street cleaning and the garbage collection," said another man. There was a nodding of several heads. "That's it; it's terrible in some places. We need equal services, equal cleanliness for all!"

Luskin, Fishkin's collaborator, listening to the exchange rendered into English by a simultaneous translator, occasionally muttered things like: "No, they shouldn't do it that way." But he didn't intervene.

The previous year Fishkin had teamed up with a Greek scholar named John Panaretos, who teaches statistics at the Athens School of Economics. Panaretos had been on a sabbatical at Berkeley and the two began to discuss what they could do in Athens - attracted, in part, by its symbolism. What emerged was an idea to apply deliberative democratic techniques to the choice of candidates for the mayoralities of Greek towns - important positions, and showcases for the two main political parties, the right-of-centre New Democracy, now in a government headed by its leader, Costas Karamanlis; and left-of-centre Pasok, headed by George Papandreou. The two prepared for this over the past year, with Fishkin expecting it to be another consultation. However, Papandreou - an old friend of Panaretos - decided to up the ante. He decided that the consultation would go beyond the consultative: that it would be binding.

The system, which Fishkin, Panaretos and some colleagues of the latter worked out - with Papandreou a benign force in the background - was this: they would get together a randomly chosen sample of the electors of Marousi. They would put before them the six Pasok members who wanted to stand for mayor of the town in the elections in June. The sample would debate what questions to ask, aided - but not prompted - by Pasok moderators trained by Fishkin, Panaretos and their team. They would then grill the candidates and choose one they thought would be the best mayor. He or she would then become Pasok's mayoral candidate.

The implications of this - if it serves as an example - are very great. Papandreou certainly wants to make it so, and he is in a position to spread the word, since he is president of the Socialist International, the body that unites the left-of-centre parties of the world in an association that is part talking shop, part mutual support, part clearing house for awkwardnesses between parties, especially when in government. Papandreou, son and grandson of Greek prime ministers, was brought up mainly in North America (his father, Andreas, was twice exiled from Greece). He studied in the US, Canada, the UK and Sweden and has an engaging, slightly scholarly manner, his American upbringing showing in the painstaking way he dealt with the many questions he was asked while attending the Marousi exercise. In another of the windowless rooms I talked to him about the implications of the event.

"One of the big things we in politics face is the abstention of the people from politics. We don't put the complexity of the issues to them. When we do ask them their opinion, we do so in a superficial way. What this does is to go back to an ancient Greek concept - and carries the idea that everyone is equal. But it does it with a scientific method so that we get close to an idea of what society as a whole is saying."

An Italian writer who was sitting in on the interview said, with an ironic grin: "So you see yourself as a new Pericles [the 5th-century BC Athenian politician credited with introducing the democratic system]?" Papandreou said patiently: "Yes, there is a heritage we can use in a positive way."

Like many left-of-centre continental European politicians, Papandreou is very keen on the European Union - and sees in deliberative democracy a possible antidote to its most besetting problem, the meagreness of its democratic mandate. "I always felt that the question of democracy in our European institutions is our major issue. There are basically three schools of thought: the British, which is that democracy

really only functions at national level and the rest is inter-governmental agreement; the idea of strengthening power in Brussels, to give it more authority - which was basically French; and the other, which is, let's make stronger institutions but also make them more democratic, find ways of citizens making decisions. During the discussions on the constitution, I pushed the idea of direct elections for the president of the EU, in a Europe-wide plebiscite. Now it's failed - but we need to keep trying to get the citizens engaged. We'll see how this works. Jim Fishkin has done important work. It could be a big thing. Here in Marousi... hopefully people will feel this was a worthwhile exercise, that they were involved, whatever their politics, in picking a good candidate."

When Papandreou left the room he was surrounded by participants demanding his opinion on the event. The main hall of the conference centre was boiling with people who had come together from the groups of 10 or 15 into which they had been divided to formulate their questions. In the course of the Sunday afternoon, they unleashed these questions on the six would-be mayors.

The first question - "Why do you have faith that you would be a good mayor, and what are your three priorities for the first six months?" - was repeated in different ways. The first to answer was Panos Alexandris, a tubby man in his forties with white hair and beard who had been a legal counsel to the previous Marousi administration. "You are called on," he told the citizens, "to select the candidate whom you think will govern in the wisest manner. And if you do me the honour of making me a candidate, I would expect, if I win, to decide on the first three priorities on the basis of a debate with the people."

It was a clever answer, and Alexandris spoke clearly, confidently and directly. He took nothing for granted and said that he would consult the public on the most important issues. None of the other candidates was as assured: one talked of "transparency", another of creating a "human-centred society". Two younger men made much (implicitly) of their youth, while two others, in middle age, were less certain, one seeming to grope for words.

What emerged from the questions and answers was a kind of nostalgia - for a Marousi that 20 years ago was a self-contained village. Even those who had not lived there then seemed to pay homage to its past: and all were critical of its present - with buildings left over from the Olympics, from which, they said, they had not benefited, a polluted environment, a motorway that bisected the suburb, and shopping malls (one existing, one planned) that seemed to be regarded as a sign of unwelcome modernity, as well as creators of traffic jams.

The candidates rarely said they couldn't do anything - though some did occasionally mention the size of the town's deficit as a problem. Alexandris was consistently strong, with a pronounced populist edge, prepared to be emotionally emphatic. And it was he who won: of 142 votes cast in the first round - almost everyone had waited till the end - he won 52, and in a second round run-off he won by 65 votes to 48 (with a number of abstentions). There was a loud burst of applause, and Alexandris looked ecstatic.

I asked Papandreou for his view: "It went much better than I thought," he said. "Everyone was so enthused and excited! And it's good for the party because they can see it works with the public." John Panaretos, the statistics professor who had put much of it together, smiled at his friend's pleasure and said: "The sky's the limit for George after this; he wants to take it out everywhere."

Fishkin was pleased too. As we tramped about the Acropolis the next day, I put it to him that perhaps some of Plato's suspicions were right: Alexandris had been plausible and crowd-pleasing - but would he really make the best mayor? "Look," he said, "in all of these exercises we've done, the people have proven themselves pretty smart. And this is catching on. Romano Prodi [now the Italian prime minister] had a primary to choose him as leader of the left coalition before the election. The US primaries are themselves becoming more open. Our biggest exercise to date will be for the EU next year, with a sample of 700 debating the main issues in Europe: it's explicitly meant to address the perceived deficit of democracy in the EU. I'm not saying it's the whole answer, but Athens shows it's a big help."

Papandreou wrote a piece for the International Herald Tribune lauding the Marousi vote, saying it revived the ancient practices of democratic Athens and proposing it as a way for all parties to nominate candidates and prioritise issues. "In Athens," he wrote, "where democracy was first developed, we have been drawing on the lessons of our forefathers to give greater legitimacy to modern-day democracy."

John Dunn writes that "as we peer back towards the democracy of Athens, through the murk of history, and quarrel endlessly about what was ever really there, we largely recapitulate Greek arguments... we do so because of the enduring power of some of these arguments, itself a testimony to the power of the way of life from which they first came."

Some of that power was shown on a June weekend in modern Athens: Alexandris, Papandreou and Fishkin all felt something of the tug of both the past and the future on their collar, and were able to say: "We have seen the ancient past, and it still works."

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