



Fishkin on deliberative democracy

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Fishkin, James, When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation ^[1], Oxford University Press, 2009.

James Fishkin, who is masterminding POWER 2010's deliberative assembly in London this weekend (see below ^[2]), is a most unusual political scientist. Most political scientists recoil from normative values like vampires confronted with a cross; Fishkin has made a life's work out of attempting to mobilise political principles of deliberative democracy – an all too rare aspect of democracy in this country. For him, deliberative democracy is a combination of political equality and deliberation.

If I have added up the numbers correctly, he has participated in or inspired some 30 deliberative assemblies around the world since 1994, in (among other places) the US, UK, Australia, Nova Scotia, Bulgaria, Athens (nice one!) and even China. The most visible of these for the UK were the Channel 4 series on crime and other issues. The assemblies usually focus on one or two issues. The POWER 2010 assembly in London will be one of the most ambitious of his experiments in living democracy, in that the assembly is seeking to establish a platform of popular priorities across the board for constitutional change in the UK.

Fishkin's essential argument is that 'mass participation' – that is, the participation of a full electorate – in policy making is flawed and open to manipulation for a variety of well-known reasons. The general public is usually not very informed, engaged or attentive. But what *would* people think if they were more informed, engaged and attentive? He posits a hard choice between actual, but 'debilitated', public opinion on the one hand, and 'deliberative but counterfactual opinion' on the other. Deliberative assemblies may, by proxy, square the circle.

Fishkin is not a political scientist for nothing, and he prepares the ground for the assemblies with a scrupulous regard so that those who take part are properly representative of the population as a whole; are fully and impartially briefed on the issues for discussion; have genuine opportunities to hear and question a variety of experts; and are enabled to express their views and participate with others in exchanging views before coming to joint conclusions. Those conclusions, it is hoped, can then reasonably be taken to be representative of the whole population if everyone experienced the same quality of preparation and debate. The political problem of course is that the wider public will not necessarily accept the conclusions, or not enough of them will (as in British Columbia's review of electoral reform).

He makes a persuasive case for his experiments in *When the People Speak*. The descriptions of the differing debates and outcomes of a long list of assemblies is continuously interesting and often fascinating. He describes a pan-EU assembly in which participants from all member states debate together across language barriers two issues - enlargement and pension policy – and combines this with his own valuable discussion of the difficulties and issues involved in creating a European 'public sphere' and dealing with the 'democratic deficit'.

There is detailed evidence of the way in which the views of participants change during the course of the assemblies from responses to surveys before and afterwards. There is evidence that they benefit from being involved, gain confidence and become, as it were, more engaged 'citizens'. But perhaps most important of all, there is evidence that demonstrates that 'ordinary citizens' are able competently and fairly to discuss and resolve complex issues in a thoughtful and receptive manner.

I rather take issue with his schematic rejection of the possibility of combining participatory and deliberative democracy, even though his systematic account of the deficiencies of 'mass participation' is compelling. This account also shows up the

deficiencies in the customary processes of consultation that British governments engage in, both openly and covertly; and ought to make enthusiasts for referendums pause. However, in my view, we need in the UK to stumble forward on both fronts in an ordered and Fabian way, guided by democratic principle and a holistic appreciation of how the various institutions fit together. Deliberative assemblies should play a significant place in such a process, and most especially, as Unlock Democracy and others argue, in agreeing a written constitution for the UK.

I very much hope that the snow and ice will not disrupt POWER 2010's attempt to move the democratic agenda further through deeper and more intense public debate.

See also oD's coverage of the European deliberative poll [HERE](#) [3]

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[1] <http://www.amazon.com/When-People-Speak-Deliberative-Consultation/dp/0199572100>

[2] <http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/guy-aitchison/uk-citizens-gather-to-disuss-how-to-reform-system>

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