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## Britain Should Deliberate Before It Votes on Europe

With the EU referendum bill racing through parliament, it is not too late to rethink fundamentals. Voters should not make their epochal decision on the basis of sound-bites and twitter-feeds. Before making their fateful choice on Britain's future, they should be given a day off from work to engage in a National Day of Deliberation on the basic issues at stake.

DDay should start with a traditional television debate between national leaders speaking on behalf of the Yes and the No. But then, citizens will deliberate in small groups of 15, and later in larger plenary assemblies. They should have a balanced briefing document, vetted by both sides.

The small groups begin where the televised debate leaves off. Each spends an hour defining questions left unanswered in the initial presentation. Everybody then proceeds to a 500-citizen assembly to hear how local representatives of the two sides respond to their concerns.

After lunch, participants repeat the morning procedure. By the end of the day, citizens will have moved far beyond the initial top-down TV debate. They will achieve a bottom-up understanding of the choices confronting the nation. Discussions begun on DDay will continue during the run-up to Referendum Day, drawing millions of others into the escalating national dialogue.

Our proposal is based on more than 70 Deliberative Polls conducted in 22 countries over the last two decades. At these events, we invite a scientific sample of several hundred citizens to come together for a similarly intensive give-and-take on major issues. But before they begin, they answer detailed questionnaires to determine their understanding of the underlying facts and their current judgment on the merits. They do the same thing at the end of Poll, allowing a rigorous basis for assessing the impact of their deliberative exercise.

We find statistically significant changes in bottom-line judgments more than two-thirds of the time. There are also large gains in knowledge and in mutual understanding. In project after project we can show that participants focus on substance not sloganeering.

One of our early Polls is particularly suggestive. In 1995, Channel Four organized an intensive discussion on whether the UK should become more or less engaged with Europe. The scientific sample of 238 was a good microcosm of the country, large enough for its representativeness and changes in opinion to be evaluated statistically. Participants came to Manchester for a weekend to engage in a series of small group exchanges competing experts for Yes and No, as well as representatives from the three major parties.

At the end of weekend, support for Britain's increased integration into the EU rose from 45% to 60%. In contrast, support for the Euro did not rise above 35%. Our before-and-after questionnaires established that participants became more knowledgeable and based their judgments on the issues.

Twenty years onward, majority opinion might well move in a very different direction. But there can be no doubt that the people of the United Kingdom are thoroughly capable of a sophisticated discussion of the crucial issues. The only serious question is whether the civil service could successfully organize the nationwide system of schools and neighborhood centers required for a country-wide engagement.

In the book-length version of our proposal, we considered the administrative problem as it applied to the United States -- concluding that it could be solved at manageable cost. These findings should encourage the Cameron government to create a high-level task force to consider the distinctive British complexities involved in implementation and report back its findings in six months.

This will give parliament enough time to consider a second referendum bill that will allow the electorate to move beyond emotional scare-tactics and boring number-

crunching as they confront the future of their country in the twenty-first century.

In sponsoring the first Deliberation Day in history, Great Britain will not only enable its people to make their choice with high seriousness. It will be setting an example for the rest of the world -- encouraging it to transform the referendum from a potent device for demagogues into a genuinely thoughtful occasion for the exercise of popular sovereignty.

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*Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin are professors at Yale and Stanford, respectively, and the authors of [Deliberation Day](http://www.amazon.com/Deliberation-Day-Bruce-Ackerman/dp/0300109644/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1434566014&sr=1-11) ([http://www.amazon.com/Deliberation-Day-Bruce-Ackerman/dp/0300109644/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1434566014&sr=1-11](http://www.amazon.com/Deliberation-Day-Bruce-Ackerman/dp/0300109644/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1434566014&sr=1-11)) (Yale University Press).*

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