We Need a Fourth Branch of Government

By George A. Papandreou

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In ancient times, politics was born of the belief that we can be masters of our own fate, and democracy became a continuing, innovative project to guarantee people a say in public decisions.

Today, however, we live in a paradox. Humanity has created vast wealth and technological know-how that could contribute to solutions for the global common good, yet immense numbers of people are disempowered, marginalized and suffering from a deep sense of insecurity. Working together, we have the ability to reshape the world as we know it. Unfortunately, that power rests in the hands of only a few.

The marginalization we see today is rooted in the globalization promoted by policy models such as the Washington Consensus, which distanced politics and governance from economic power. Companies in the financial, pharmaceutical, agricultural, oil and tech industries are no longer governed by the laws of a single state — they live in a separate global stratosphere, one regulated to suit their interests.

The consequences of all this are huge disparities in wealth and power. There is, for example, an overconcentration of money in media and politics, due to lobbying and outright corruption. And in many countries, democratic institutions have been captured and the will of the people has been compromised.

As Nathan Gardels and Nicolas Berggruen argue in their 2019 book “Renovating Democracy,” the social and technological change wrought by globalization “is so enormous that individuals and communities alike feel they are drowning in the swell of seemingly anonymous forces.”

Serving as prime minister of Greece from 2009 to 2011, I attempted to improve tax collection in order to cut the huge debt and deficit I inherited. But the efforts of my government fell far short of collecting what was owed. Investors took advantage of the global financial system to move capital beyond Greece's borders, draining the country of money at its most vulnerable moment.

This arbitrary power of globalized companies violates a basic concept of democracy that the ancient Greeks called “isonomia,” or the equality of all before the law.

Uncontrolled global power has fueled nationalist slogans such as the Brexit movement’s “take back control.” Yet as Joseph Stiglitz writes in his new book, “People, Power, and Profits: Progressive Capitalism for an Age of Discontent,” “the populist response, namely a retreat from globalized trade through the protection of markets, is a red herring. ... The real conflict is elsewhere. On the one side [you have] workers and consumers — the 99 percent — in both developing and developed countries, versus corporate interests on the other.” For the new global economy to succeed, he says, we must build new institutions.

We have a choice to make.

We could embrace reactive politics, elect authoritarian leaders, build walls, and promote isolationism and racism. This path offers a simple yet illusory way to “take back control,” but in fact accomplishes the opposite: It gives up control to power-hungry demagogues who divide us, weaken civil society and feed us dead-end solutions.

But rather than embrace those false promises, let us instead reinvent and deepen democratic institutions, in order to empower people, tame global capitalism, eliminate inequality and assert control over our international techno-society.

From my experience, an important step toward these goals would be to create a fourth branch of government.
This new deliberative branch, in which all citizens — the “demos” — could participate, would sit alongside the executive, legislative and judicial branches. All laws and decisions would first go through an e-deliberation process before being debated in our city halls, parliaments or congresses.

Inspired by the agora of ideas and debate in ancient Athens, I set up as prime minister a rudimentary “wiki-law” process for deliberating issues online before laws are voted on. Trusting collective wisdom brought insightful and invaluable responses.

In contrast to how social media works today, a similar platform could develop transparent algorithms that use artificial intelligence to promote wholesome debate and informed dialogue while fairly aggregating citizens’ positions to promote consensus building. All who participate in this public e-agora would appear under their true identities — real voices, not bots. Eponymous, not anonymous.

To facilitate debate, forums of professionals could give informed opinions on issues of the day. Public television, newspapers, radio and podcasts could enlighten the conversation. Schools would be encouraged to participate. So-called deliberative polling (again inspired by ancient Athens and developed for modern society by James Fishkin at Stanford University) could improve decision-making by leveraging sustained dialogue among polling participants and experts to produce more informed public opinion. The concept was used by the Citizens’ Assembly in Ireland from 2016 to 2018, a riveting exercise in deliberative democracy that produced breakthroughs on seemingly intractable issues such as abortion.

Today, we are on the verge of momentous global changes, in robotics, A.I., the climate and more. The world’s citizens must debate the ethical implications of our increasingly godlike technological powers.

At the same time, the threat of global warming is an opportunity for us to overcome our nationalistic divisions and unite in a fight for survival and just, sustainable development.

We must nurture the citizen-driven core of this new deliberative branch at the local level, with an overhaul of our education systems. Today’s schools have severed learning from civic participation, critical debate and empathy for our fellow human beings. To transcend our ethnic, racial and socioeconomic differences, we need classrooms to produce global citizens — not globe-trotting elites, but students who grasp humanity’s challenges and can deliberate beyond borders.

Our newfound powers can be used to abuse and hurt — the ancients called this “hubris.” Or they can be used to heal, and to include others in a democratic culture that supports the public and planetary good.

This is the democratic challenge of today.

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