

THE  
**DEMARCHY**  
MANIFESTO

*for better public policy*

HOW TO ENLIGHTEN, ARTICULATE AND GIVE  
EFFECT TO PUBLIC OPINION

***John Burnheim***

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# The Demarchy Manifesto

For Better Public Policy

John Burnheim

**SOCIETAS**  
**essays in political**  
**& cultural criticism**

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For Luca Belgiorno-Nettis

You showed how to get things moving

The sickness of a time is cured by an alteration in the form of life of human beings, and it was possible for the sickness of philosophical problems to get cured only through a changed mode of thought and of life.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

## Preface

The message of this book can be stated quite succinctly. We face problems that call for collective decision on matters of unprecedented importance and difficulty. If we are to have any chance of getting those decisions right, the procedures by which we come to them must be divorced from struggles for political power. There is a way of doing this that can be institutionalised without any exercise of power, just by voluntary organisations. I can't prove that my proposals will work, but I hope to convince enough people to give my suggestions a trial.

My views are based on a lifetime of academic study of all the various dimensions of the problem. If you spread your attention over so many fields your knowledge of most of them is going to be very thin. I can't claim to be an authority on any of them. The arguments in this book are put in simple language. Inevitably that involves a lot of over-simplification. What I ask of you, the reader, is that you make allowance for that, at least provisionally, until you can look at what I'm saying in a new perspective. The question I want you to ask is this: How do we get sound public policy?

Democratic theory and practice has been focused on problems of power. It is torn between two objectives, giving power to the people and minimising power over the individual. I accept that our present democratic institutions are a reasonable solution to most of those problems, but they are not a satisfactory way of getting sound policies on many matters. The focus has to be on what to do about that. I think that focus needs a new name. So I've tried to appropriate the word 'demarchy' for it.

The present text adopts an entirely different perspective from my *Is Democracy Possible?* That book was frankly utopian, speculating about the possibility of a complex of councils chosen by lot exercising all the functions of government. The present text



is concerned with immediate practical problems. The time may come when the older text may take on a more practical relevance, if my present proposals are successful.

Over a very long lifetime I have acquired a host of debts to colleagues and friends with whom I have discussed the topics raised in this book. To do justice to those whom I should credit would call for a host of footnotes that my failing memory couldn't produce and readers could hardly assimilate. I confine myself to thanking those who have read and commented on various drafts of this book: Geoff Gallop, Paul Crittenden, Luca Belgiorno-Nettis, Creagh Cole, Denise Russell, Iain Walker, Keith Sutherland, Lyn Carson, Marcus Green, Elizabeth Johnston, Catherine Burnheim, Gavan Butler and Margaret Harris. I'm indebted to each of them for significant improvements to earlier drafts, as well as for their encouragement.

My editor, Kate Manton, helped turn a rambling mess into something more presentable. Thank you Kate.

To Margaret Harris I owe, beside her careful checking of the text, the fundamental gift of having kept me in excellent health and spirits into advanced old age.

John Burnheim  
Sydney  
September 20, 2015

# Introduction

What I call 'demarchy' is primarily a process of transferring the initiative in formulating policy options from political parties to councils representative of the people most directly affected by those policies. The task of those councils would be to distil from public discussion the most acceptable policy in a particular matter. It would be up to voters to insist that the politicians heed them. There is no question of constitutional change, no new parties or new laws, no call for a mass conversion of opinion, but a suggestion about how to initiate a change in accepted practice, starting with actions that may seem of little significance in the big picture, but are still justified by their specific purposes. My focus is on how policy is produced and adopted. I am not concerned with questions about the philosophical basis of state power, or human rights, or crime and punishment. The precise forms these things take in practice are a matter of conventions, which I do not propose to challenge. There is already much debate about these matters. I am concerned about what I see as a more important, but neglected, question.

I begin by concentrating on how to establish some new practices and initiatives in policy formation, empowering those most affected to take the initiative in formulating what they want. It is no advantage to have a choice of products if none of those on offer meets your requirements. The best situation is to be able to say exactly what you want and commission specialists to supply it. Or is that analogy anachronistic and inappropriate in the era of mass production and distribution? I try to analyse our unique problems. My ultimate aim is to transform our political culture. I intend to show how different practices of policy formation are appropriate to different problems at every level from the local to the global and how they might come to be accepted.

## Changing the paradigm

I am attempting to do three things:

- Show how to improve policy formation in government at the local and national levels, using procedures that confront politicians with an authoritative expression of what informed public opinion believes needs to be done in specific policy matters. The aim is to constrain politicians to legislate and administer in accordance with those policies.
- Propose that similar procedures could be used in establishing specialised global authorities strong enough to constrain national governments to conform to their decisions without anything like a world state.
- Suggest that we need to change some of the assumptions underlying much of our political thinking and practice in the light of the global ramifications of so many of our activities.

A central idea is to change the model of political communities that has dominated traditional thinking and practice. Political communities, typically nation-states, have been *personified* and taken as complete in themselves. All the diverse components should act in unison under the direction of the head, the brain. In a top-down sequence the design of the society is decided by a single authority and the other elements of the whole are forced to conform. In a constitutional state what the head is entitled to do is limited. Democracy also gives people a say in choosing those who exercise supreme authority. Each state is entirely independent of all the others. Relations between them can only be regulated by mutual agreement. There is no authority with the power to alter or enforce the set of conventions that constitute international law. On occasion groups of nations agree to punish other nations for what they see as breaches of international law, but they have no institutional authority to do so.

In early-modern times, when nation-states were largely homogeneous and self-sufficient, the model of the community as a person had a certain plausibility. I want to suggest that in the contemporary world it is obsolete and misleading. Instead, I

suggest, the appropriate model of our situation is that of a global ecosystem consisting of a host of diverse subsystems, each with its specific needs and activities. Each of these subsystems has its relative independence from and interconnections with other systems. The order of any such whole arises from the interactions of its diverse constituents.

From an economic perspective we live in a world of international markets in all the most important commodities, of global communications, internationalised lifestyles and of moral concern about the rights of people all over the world. Freedom of trade, communications, lifestyles and action on human rights all depend on explicit and enforceable arrangements. At present we have no very satisfactory way of setting up such arrangements. In particular, we have developed physical and social technologies that change the processes on which all our ecosystems depend. Many of the activities we invent have systemic effects that can be very destructive. Those effects must be identified and controlled if the ecosystem we depend on is to survive and flourish. Our modern forms of life are oriented towards discovering more things to do individually and collectively. In many ways the social ecosystem is even more complex than its biological substrate. So the world we live in is changing rapidly, inevitably creating new problems or posing old ones on a new scale. It is essential that we develop flexible and effective ways of responding to these problems. What I am trying to get people to do is to look at my proposals in the light of that need, not just in terms of our habitual assumptions and aspirations.

### **Generating policy**

People have become increasingly aware that the existing political processes cannot be relied on to produce sound decisions about matters of public policy.

What is wrong with politics? Many things: reliance on expensive and misleading advertising to sell package deals to the electorate;

the power that gives to the media and to big money; the adversarial party system which limits and distorts people's choices, and so on. But the basic one is that many important matters are decided, not on the specific merits of the case, but according to the strategies of professional politicians seeking to maximise their power. Whether the politicians are motivated by a desire to serve their constituents or some philosophical ideal, as politicians they have to win the contest for power. I shall return to this problem in more detail later.

In both the struggle to attract key sections of the voters and the struggles for power within parties and coalitions, poor decisions are made and entrenched. Politicians are driven to make rash promises, to play on imaginary hopes and fears and to misrepresent the issues. There is much talk of accountability, but that usually reduces to getting politicians to make very specific promises and trying to hold them to fulfilling their undertakings. As the saying goes, sometimes the problem is that politicians break their promises, but often the problem is that they keep them. In the struggle for power in the legislature, politicians have to make deals for support in which they undertake to support measures and politicians they don't like in return for those others giving them support that would not otherwise be forthcoming on other matters that are usually irrelevant to that issue. To assure that particular policy proposals are assessed on their specific merits rather than on their tactical advantages we have to find ways of disentangling them from the struggle for power.

The political process has four stages or aspects: policy formation, legislation, execution and judicial enforcement. At present policy formation is in the hands of political parties, which, by a very poor set of decision procedures, attempt to present themselves as preferable to any of the other contestants. The electors are faced with a take-it-or-leave-it choice of packages that entrust the parties with many blank cheques. What my proposals aim to do is unscramble the packages and give people an effective say in policy formation, especially in matters that affect them directly. Public discussion of specific issues will be effective to the extent

that it focuses on considerations directly relevant to those issues. By entrusting the task of formulating best policy on each issue to a distinct group of people who form a representative sample of the various people most directly affected by the outcome, we can ensure that no proposal is adopted for reasons that are irrelevant to its merits. On the other hand, any authority these decisions might claim would not rest on any formal status, but simply on their being seen as the best decisions available.

What I envisage is that the parties seeking election to legislative and executive office would present themselves to voters, not on the basis of promises or ideologies or sectional interests, but as willing and able to implement the policies that emerge from a sound decision process. At least the most important policy decisions would be made by the people, not the politicians. Instead of the public being offered whatever choices the politicians give them, the public now can make specific proposals and challenge the politicians to implement them. That should put an end to the cult of the leader as the guarantor of public policy. Creative leadership is needed in every activity, but it cannot be monopolized by a single person.

### **A new perspective**

What I suggest, then, is that 'we' (just relatively small groups of people like you and me) can, if we so desire, initiate a revolution in the way our communities make decisions about public policy and public goods and services at every level, from the very local to the global, without a revolution in the classical sense of seizing state power and reforming things from the top down. Instead I argue that it is not just possible but necessary that we start from very specific problems and approach them in a new perspective, making much more use of practices that are already in use in limited contexts. Getting started does not presuppose any legislative change or official authorisation or even general agreement. The aim is to win recognition, not assume it. We have to support bodies that

stimulate sound discussion and are capable of producing good, practical policy decisions.

The change of perspective I want to persuade you to adopt is as follows. Set aside for the moment the democratic obsession with giving everybody a vote on every matter that could possibly affect them, however little they know or care about it. Set aside visions of national self-sufficiency. Concentrate instead on how to get the best practical decisions on the very diverse matters where it is advantageous to make collective decisions. I am *not* saying: leave it to the experts, especially the producers. What I advocate is putting specific areas of policy in the hands of councils that are representative of those who are most substantially affected by those decisions, the key stakeholders in those matters, and getting them to coordinate their decisions with other councils by negotiation rather than direction from above. The point is to develop the ecosystem by ensuring the flourishing of its diverse constituents rather than to fit them into some preconceived design.

Present political practice acknowledges the fundamental importance of public opinion, as well as of expert opinion. Effective social policy has to be endorsed and valued by the community generally. Politicians are driven by polling and tie themselves in knots attempting to put an attractive spin on the policies they advocate, while their opponents attempt to vilify them. Public discussion is too often dominated by such adventitious factors. The results of answers to poll questions at best reflect what people see as particularly salient, not some balanced and informed discussion of the question. What we lack is a sound process of discussion and decision that is directed by concern about specific problems, enlightening public opinion about them, attempting to get beyond uncritical assumptions and ideologies. Bodies that can do that will have an authority that present forms of 'consultation', as well as partisan think-tanks and lobby groups, lack. The attitude that needs to dominate discussion and decision is that we are faced with a situation of diverse and often conflicting considerations, needing to find a practical, generally acceptable, solution to the problems of

doing something constructive about them. Not everybody is going to agree with that solution, but nearly everybody will be prepared to accept it as the best we can do at the moment and look forward to reviewing its performance in due course.

My strategy is strictly practical. All that is required to get enough politicians to take notice of any proposed solution to a particular problem is that most uncommitted voters are in favour of it. The 'rusted-on' party faithful will tag along, once they recognise that accepting the proposal in question is preferable to losing power. It is not even necessary that most swing voters be convinced of the merits of my overall proposals. If they see the merits of the solutions that the councils devise to a number of important questions, they will gradually come to see those procedures as the best way of bypassing the partisan politics dominated by the struggle for power. The crucial task is to get a number of such councils up and running, each addressing some specific problem, independently of political parties and vested interests. They need to be adequately designed and funded so that they get the chance to prove themselves. I need to persuade enough people with the necessary resources to devote to that task.

I expect that the existence of impartial councils will have a salutary effect on public discussion. Interest groups in urging their cases will not concentrate on defeating their adversaries, but on reaching some acceptable compromise with them. They should try to influence the bodies that are working to evolve such compromises rather than relying on politicians to favour them over their adversaries. Power struggles will go on as long as there are institutions that operate by bloc voting, but those procedures will become increasingly irrelevant to the substance of our decisions and the perspectives in which we frame them. I shall delay discussion of objections to my proposals until the third part of this text. For example, an obvious danger is that the orientation towards consensus favours feeble compromises at the expense of bold and incisive policies. My hope would be that concentrating discussion on very specific problems would minimise the effect of