

Peter Knauer S.J.

Principles of Democracy

What is democracy?

How democracy functions depends on how people understand it. In particular, if democracy is interpreted to mean only that people struggle to gain a majority to secure their own interests, it will inevitably harm minorities.

There is, however, a richer understanding of democracy. Our faculty of reason enables us to allow other people and their thoughts to be 'represented within ourselves', so that we can put ourselves in their situation. We can choose to act towards others as we would wish them to act towards us.

This human ability to bear others in mind can turn our mind into a kind of parliament, where we have a seat and a voice not alone, but with others. Before making decisions, we can consider the interests of all concerned, so that the outcome minimizes harm for all. By respecting this procedure, democracy in the political world, the rule of the majority may genuinely promote the wellbeing of all.

Representative democracy

Europe's tradition is one of representative rather than of direct democracy. That is, people elect representatives to make policy on their behalf. In almost all European societies, referenda are exceptional events. We elect representatives for their own qualities, their perceived trustworthiness and skills. They are to use their own judgment, authorized by their election. They must be attentive to popular opinion, but are not puppets. There is nevertheless an alternation of power. The representatives who govern us will again be governed by us in the next election. Nevertheless – in an increasingly globalised world – representative democracy needs participative democracy as its counterpart. Participation is not about making final decisions, but about the possibility to contribute to the solution of problems.

Representative and participatory structures reflect the principle that 'what concerns all may be treated by all'.

Democracy needs well-informed citizens. Our representatives have a double task: to be competent in the issues to be decided, and to be open to people's participation.

Structures for participative democracy are still scarcely established and embedded in the European Institutions.

Proportionality

The Treaty of Lisbon has a protocol on the application of the principles of proportionality and subsidiarity. All legal measures of the Union must be proportionate; they should not be in the long run counterproductive but sustainable. To be proportionate means to minimize burdens falling upon the Union, national governments, other bodies and even citizens. The measures must be commensurate with the objective to be achieved. We might add: burdens must be minimized *for everyone*, including people beyond Europe. European policy must have a universal horizon.

The principle of proportionality may even be the fundamental principle of ethics. One should never act in a counterproductive way, destroying in the long run and under a non-restricted but universal horizon just the value one wants to realize.

Subsidiarity

Subsidiarity is proportionality extended into the area of political method. Decisions are to be taken as closely as possible to those most affected by them. The higher authority in society should only intervene to strengthen the lesser authority, or when the lesser cannot resolve the problems. So, by the Treaty of Lisbon, the European Union restrains itself from intervening unnecessarily in decisions proper to member states. They in turn should respect regional and local decision-making. The application of the principle of subsidiarity is rarely self-evident, since local decisions often affect people far beyond the locality.

Proposals

The structures of the EU are a complex mix of community structures (the Union acting as a whole), and intergovernmental structures (the member states acting in negotiation and sometimes in competition). The EU also has well-established instruments for consulting the regions. However, as a union of both states and citizens, the EU still needs to find adequate procedures for citizen participation in preparing decisions by proposing solutions for common problems. A Wikipedia-like structure (everyone can contribute, and solutions can be discussed) for this could be conducive.

Should it be possible, in elections, to choose not only one's favorite party, but how one wants the parliament to be composed of different parties? One might have the possibility to distribute 20 points between different parties. In the century of computers, this may no more be too complicated.

As in democracy all power proceeds from the people and also children belong to the people, parents should have a voice as procurators for their children.