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The democracy issue

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Joanna Choukeir



“The increasing interest in democratic renewal presents an opportunity to reimagine and strengthen democracy”

Democracy is at a crossroads. Across the globe, democratic systems have been challenged, tested and, in some cases, weakened. The rise of authoritarianism and populism, erosion of civil liberties, decline of trust, and proliferation of misinformation threaten the very fabric of democratic governance. But hope is not lost. The increasing interest in democratic renewal presents an opportunity to reimagine and strengthen democracy. This opportunity is critical, as we face polycrises that can only be solved through cross-societal cooperation and collective action.

This issue of *RSA Journal*, on the theme of democracy and citizenship, offers a range of perspectives that reflect the complexities facing fair, equitable and inclusive governance, while inspiring us with innovative examples of democratic renewal.

Andy Haldane explores the implications of devolution for regional and local government in the UK, suggesting that devolution can lead to a seismic shift in governance. Andy’s interview with Tracy Brabin provides a personal account of the impact of devolution on the work of the mayor of West Yorkshire, discussing her goals, mayoral powers and the importance of the creative industries.

As Newcastle University and the RSA become the new hosts for the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre, Tom Kenyon argues that the value of the UK’s creative industries has been undersold and over-centralised. Peter Bazalgette advocated in his RSA President’s Lecture for creative industries as a critical catalyst for innovation and social and economic progress.

Innovation, however, doesn’t come without consequence. Nina Schick discusses how AI has threatened democratic processes by spreading

misinformation and manipulating public opinion. Naomi Oreskes and Erik M Conway’s article also examines the role of misinformation, arguing that dogma about the ‘magic’ of the marketplace has had disastrous consequences for trust in government systems.

From threat to hope. Singalilwe Chilemba’s article on democracy in Malawi provides a fascinating case study of how democratic systems can be strengthened despite the pandemic and authoritarian trends in other parts of Africa.

Similarly, Claudia Chwalisz presents a new democratic paradigm defined by citizenship participation, representation by lot, and deliberation. Young people are undeniably the future of such democratic communities, and Harriet Andrews details how The Politics Project’s approach of facilitating conversations between young people and politicians through its ‘Digital Surgeries’ equips the next generation with the tools to engage meaningfully in democratic processes.

So, where to next? Naomi Smith argues for radical electoral reform away from first past the post and Alexa Clay underlines a growing movement of ‘democracy entrepreneurs’. One example is how Mel Smith, FRSA, and her organisation, Grapevine, are empowering local communities via a host of relationship-centred initiatives.

Taken together, the articles in this issue of *RSA Journal* examine the challenges facing democracy and citizenship today, alongside an invitation to see them as living, breathing systems that require constant rejuvenation and innovation to contribute towards a resilient, rebalanced and regenerative world. I hope this will inspire you, as it has me, to consider what role you are playing in promoting democratic renewal. ■

Joanna Choukeir is Director of Design and Innovation at the RSA

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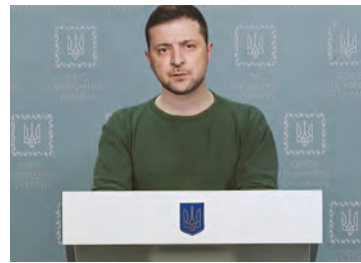
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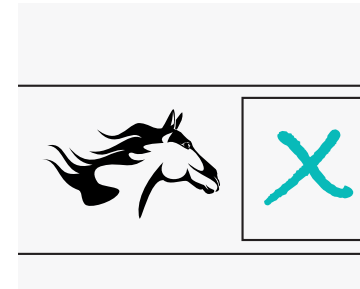
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The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce. Where world-leading ideas are turned into world-changing actions.

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We unite people and ideas in collective action to create opportunities to regenerate our world.

We are

A unique global network of changemakers enabling people, places and the planet to flourish in harmony.

RSA



Scotland's just transition

The RSA's recently published "Scottish government just transition report" details the findings of research performed by the RSA, with support from the Scottish government, on how participatory futures approaches can ensure that local citizens' voices and lived experiences are embedded into just transition planning in Scotland.

The project set out to test innovative methods for effectively and creatively involving different communities with energy transition plans in Scotland, and the wider changes (such as in transport and domestic heating) that will be needed to move towards net zero. To do this, the RSA hosted workshops in Fife and Dumfries, bringing together citizens to discuss how changes could impact these areas.

Participatory futures can help better incorporate lived experience into decision-making, providing a better understanding of the views of those

communities most impacted by change. The workshops, which yielded a range of insights, kept a regenerative approach front and centre, inviting people to think longer term and consider the interdependencies of humans, other living beings and ecosystems.

Participants demonstrated a clear desire to be more involved in decision-making and practical action related to the just transition, but articulated feeling a lack of empowerment. The RSA's research will help inform the Scottish government's Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan (ESJTP), ensuring that involvement of communities is meaningful and goes beyond mere consultation.

In her last public speech as first minister, delivered on 20 March 2023 at RSA House, Nicola Sturgeon referenced the project, saying it "is helping inform our work in quite an important way. And it helps, I think, demonstrate how these twin challenges, inequality and climate, come together."

Action

Rethinking Public Dialogue

Rethinking Public Dialogue is a £540,000 programme funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and delivered by the RSA. Its purpose is to trial innovative approaches, developed by nine grantees, to engaging the public in decisions that affect their lives.

Public dialogue has long been used as a tool to develop and test new policies. Participants are given information by subject and policy experts, reflect on and discuss their views and those of others, and come to a viewpoint. The result is better policies which are more likely to be supported.

But this approach has inherent limitations. It is top-down and it can also be exclusive, with a structure and 'talk-centric' focus that prevents some people from participating effectively – or at all.

Rethinking Public Dialogue is testing these nine innovative approaches to public dialogue, from 'data scraping' social media about neurodiversity to using art to explore new visions of Black leadership. Every project is ambitious and unique.

Over the course of the programme, the RSA will help the grantees to evaluate their work and make practical recommendations allowing others to follow in their footsteps, and will run events and publish a series of reports and guides to change the conversation about public dialogue in the UK.

Image courtesy of RSA

RSA Insights

£4,073

The additional amount per annum young people aged 16–24 would be earning if their incomes had grown at the same rate as the UK national average between 2001 and 2022. The income disparity across age groups highlights how young people have been neglected by policymakers and the economy. Urgent action is needed to help young people become economically secure and financially stable.

■ To read the full report, visit thersa.org/reports/young-peoples-health-and-economic-security

57%

The percentage of primary school teachers in England who give "supporting positive change in the community" as a motivation for pursuing youth social action with their pupils. The RSA's TeacherTapp surveys show teachers believe active citizenship is important to learning outcomes but lack time and resources. The RSA's final Third Benefit report will explore teacher experience of youth social action.

■ To learn more, visit thersa.org/blog/2022/11/youth-social-action-primary-school-teachers-educators

£54K

The total investment per head in the London Borough of Camden, compared with £9,250 per head in Manchester and £3,525 in Tyneside, the highest and lowest, respectively, across the Core Cities. This speaks to the urgent need to rebalance levels of investment in places outside of London, and the importance of the RSA's work to support the Core Cities.

■ To find out more, visit thersa.org/projects/uk-urban-futures-commission

Arts in the spotlight

Bureau of Silly Ideas

Playing with 'Sid and Nancy' (two motorised wheelie bins) in the 1990s led Roger Hartley, FRSA, to establish the Bureau of Silly Ideas (BOSI), which creates and stages a variety of interactive street shows at festivals and in public spaces.

Now, BOSI has created the superfictional entity United Nations Board of Significant Inspiration (UNBOSI), "a lesser-known department of the UN established in 1950 to investigate acts of extreme inspiration and the individuals who commit those acts". (A 'superfiction' describes a visual or conceptual artwork to create organisations, business structures or even the lives of invented individuals.) According to Roger, UNBOSI "uses this art to make complex sociopolitical issues accessible and engages in activities that blend incredulity and plausibility

Image courtesy of BOSI



to inspire communities across the world, creating democratic access points that encourage people to converse about democracy."

■ To learn more about BOSI, visit www.bureauofsillyideas.com
 ■ To learn more about UNBOSI, visit www.UNBOSI.org

Agenda



Innovation in the North

The RSA has been working with place and creative sector leaders in the North of England to develop the concept of a 'Northern Creative Corridor'.

In June 2022, RSA Chief Executive Andy Haldane spoke about this ambition in his speech at the Bradford Literature Festival. He described the venture as the cultural equivalent of the Northern Powerhouse, with a goal to amplify the creative industries (and creativity in industry) as a driver of innovation and impact across the region.

We are the Royal Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce; the creative industries sit at the nexus of these disciplines, and we see them as a force for positive change. To develop our expertise in the sector, we have also secured a partnership with Newcastle University to host the prestigious Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (previously at Nesta).

This partnership is an exciting step forward towards connecting our policy and innovation capabilities and growing the RSA's physical presence in the North of England.

■ To learn more, visit <https://bit.ly/44Q9T9a>

Events

What would a fair society look like?

The world stands at a crossroads, in urgent need of a compelling vision to renew faith in and galvanise collective action towards a better future for all. Philosopher and economist Daniel Chandler explores the intellectual resources we might draw on to redesign methods of civic participation that could reinvigorate democratic thinking and practice.

■ Watch now: <https://bit.ly/40svYaf>
#RSAhealth

Peace and justice

Oleksandra Matviichuk, 2022 Nobel Peace Laureate and head of the Centre for Civil Liberties in Ukraine, asks all of us to become more active producers of democracy, and to support new global alliances for the defence of human rights and the restoration of justice as a necessary basis for peace in Ukraine, and the world.

■ Watch now: <https://bit.ly/3H3nJuH>
#RSAdesign

State leadership and the green revolution we need

The Hon Mia Amor Mottley, Prime Minister of Barbados and one of TIME Magazine's most influential world leaders, is joined by economist Mariana Mazzucato to discuss how governments can lead in driving innovation and delivering inclusive and equitable growth for citizens in the face of increasing economic and climate insecurity.

■ Watch now: <https://bit.ly/3N3vkwP>
#RSAgoodwork

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New Fellows

Stephen Barchan started his career as a freelance music typesetter and proofreader for major UK music publishing houses and composers. Currently, Stephen teaches music privately in South East London, encouraging students to explore and further their musical aims, curiosities and creative potential and "advocating a greater awareness of musical history and tools for musical learning and discovery".

Jana Soukupová is Director of the Cabinet Department of the Czech Republic's Minister for Science, Research and Innovation and Founder of Youth, Speak Up!, which aims to introduce young people to politics and how it can address the issues they find most relevant. Jana is also currently working on the development of a gamified app with a goal of changing social norms and perspectives on gender-based violence.

Magaga Enos is Director for Full Steam Forward Kenya and the HundreED Country lead ambassador for Kenya. He also works full-time with BEADS for Education, supporting the education of girls from vulnerable communities in Kenya. Magaga is passionate about women's and girls' empowerment through access to quality education, drawing this passion from his childhood experiences with his mother, who is his "biggest inspiration".

Melissa Blackburn is a Creative Producer and Knowledge Exchange Manager on the College of Arts, Technology and the Environment (CATE) at the University of the West of England. She works with artists, academics, businesses and institutions on creative research and development projects (including Bristol + Bath Creative R + D) that support responsible, inclusive, low-carbon innovation.

Some Fellowship events are online; to find out more and connect with Fellows in our global community, visit thersa.org/events/fellowship

Grow your idea through RSA Catalyst, which offers grants for Fellow-led and new or early-stage projects with a social goal.

■ To find out more, visit thersa.org/fellowship/catalyst-awards

Image courtesy of Piranha Photography

“Lived experience is your superpower”

Mayor of West Yorkshire Tracy Brabin talks to Andy Haldane about her unconventional route into politics, her vision for devolution in the region, the power of the creative industries and the frustration of cancelled trains

Andy Haldane: We'll be discussing topics including devolution and decentralisation, to which you've given loads of thought and action. But first, can we let people know a bit more about your background?

Tracy Brabin: I see myself as an accidental leader. I never anticipated being in this role or even a member of parliament. I grew up in Batley in a council flat with my mum, my dad and my sister. I was the first in my family to go to university and always, always, wanted to be an actor, which was a bit mad, as nobody in my family was an actor and we had no money. But I went to a really good school where they encouraged the arts, and that made me more determined than ever.

Not having family connections, it was a tough job but, being proper raw Yorkshire, I was easy to cast, and not having gone to drama school I don't think I had the rough edges smoothed off. One of my first jobs was in *A Bit of a Do* with David Jason, and then I developed a career as an actor, which is a real privilege given my background.

But I always remembered where I came from, and I was always a member of the Labour party and would travel the country when I was in

Coronation Street supporting candidates and MPs who were up for election. And that's how I met Jo Cox, who was standing in Batley. I worked door-knocking for her election, and she did really well. And then she was murdered, and my life just took a different route.

At the funeral I asked one of her friends if there was anything I could do, and she said, "Do you want to be an MP?" It just fell into place. I was an MP for five years, four of which were on the shadow front bench, and then devolution hit. I was looking to find a woman mayor I could get behind and then I realised I had to walk the walk rather than talk the talk. So, here we are.

Haldane: You're coming up to two years in post as metro mayor of West Yorkshire, the first metro mayor of West Yorkshire and the first female metro mayor. What have been the biggest challenges so far?

Brabin: Trying to define my own leadership style because I have no role model. I can't think, "I'd be like that mayor, that's a good way to be if you're a female mayor." So, it's about empathy and natural instincts. Your own lived experience is your superpower – authenticity, being able to live in the community, gives you great strength. ▶

Tracy Brabin was elected mayor of West Yorkshire on 10 May 2021. She previously served as MP for Batley and Spen from 2016 to 2021

Andy Haldane is Chief Executive Officer at the RSA



Photo by Matt Bell

I use the buses and the trains; I know about struggling to get a GP appointment. If you live the life of the people you represent, leadership is a little easier.

The other mayors – there are 10 in the UK – have been nothing but delightful, welcoming, inclusive. We’re a powerful voice, and I feel there is strength in being in this gang, with common challenges. Politics sometimes seems to be getting in the way, and the mayhem of parliament for the last 18 months has been holding us back. On a recent trade mission to India, people were saying, “We’re not engaging with government, we’re just engaging with mayors, because there’s too much chaos.” Mayors are where we can deliver at a very local level and have relationships that are consistent.

Haldane: Might we be seeing a realignment of the political gravity? We’ve probably got far greater stability in regional politics than in national politics now. Does it feel like a pivotal moment for UK governance?

Brabin: I think eventually there will be PhD students looking at this! There is a bit of an arms race between the parties about who can hand over power fastest. We’re hearing from the Labour party that they want to oversee the biggest ever handover of power out of Westminster and Whitehall to the regions. My challenge to Labour is the time frames: will that be delivered at the end of the first parliament? We have to act fast, and I do think [Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities] Michael Gove really is chomping at the bit to give that power away. It’s an exciting time.

Haldane: On the trailblazer deals [agreements between Whitehall and local government that give mayoral authorities greater powers] you’re hoping to be next in the queue. What would you like the details of that deal to be?

Brabin: Currently, the way it works is broken. For example, the levelling-up money. Bradford spent over £600,000 on consultants to put their bids in – they weren’t successful in any of them. Leeds spent £480,000, and not one of their six bids was successful. What an absolute waste of money. If you give that to mayors, you’ll get more bang for your buck, and you will stop this begging-bowl, *Hunger Games*-style pitching of one region against another, because our ambition

shouldn’t be at the cost of someone else’s failure.

The trailblazer deal is also about being able to hold onto the increased business rates from growth, so you don’t always have to keep going back to government. We’ve got a £20m accelerator programme investing in business and then hopefully those profits come back to us to reinvest.

Haldane: The point is often made that along this road towards devolution and decentralisation, there need to be extra checks and balances for local leaders. How would you bring about improved transparency and accountability?

Brabin: You can’t get the money without being accountable, of course. I am very much used to being scrutinised and held to account, and not only in front of select committees. Fundamentally, I am also held to account by the 2.4 million people of West Yorkshire, and if I don’t deliver for the public, then I’m not going to come back in.

Transparency is really important and there are opportunities for corruption, and that’s why we mayors have to be the squeakiest clean of any politicians. We have to be held to the highest standards. As an out-of-work actor, £3 meant a lot to me. So, when I’m talking about the City Regional Sustainable Transport Settlement of £870m, it’s gobsmacking. Every penny should be accounted for because that’s what the public expects.

Haldane: Can I ask you to say a little more about your ambitious plans around culture and the creative industries? I’d love to hear more about your Creative New Deal.

Brabin: It’s no surprise, given three decades in the creative industries, I really understand the power of it. Coming into this role, I was quite surprised that we didn’t have a culture committee. I know how culture has changed my life and the lives of the people that I’ve spent time with, whether that’s skills, self-confidence, better mental health, regeneration, opportunities.

We’re about to see an unprecedented amount of cultural activity in the region, which will be rocket fuel for the creative sector and its supply chain, upskilling a new generation of talent and boosting the visitor economy. The mighty Bradford will be the UK City of Culture in 2025, and leading up to it, we have ‘years of culture’



taking place in each of our other districts: Leeds and Kirklees this year, then Wakefield and Calderdale in 2024.

The Creative New Deal will make it possible for everyone to have access to a cultural life, not necessarily just coming to a theatre or going to the opera. Is there an opportunity for you to be in a choir? Is there a writing group in your local library? Culture should be available to everybody. We’ve allocated money towards creative social prescribing, so a singer could support a community who have dementia, for example, or dancers could support young people with poor mental health.

Culture is a powerful tool of wellbeing and joy, but there’s also a hard economic argument about investment, jobs and training. For example, the Mayor’s Screen Diversity Programme, run by Screen Yorkshire, was set up when I became mayor. Of the last cohort of young, diverse, working-class kids, 50% have gone directly into a job or further training in film and TV, and 43% of that cohort have a disability. Now, you don’t just get those life chances – you need interventions of the sort that we are creating. I’m hoping this will help us economically because young people won’t have to leave the region to fulfil their dreams.

Haldane: I think our views on this are spectacularly aligned. Having grown up in the

“If you’re looking for growth, invest in a sector that is already growing and grow it faster”

region myself, I know the parts that need some TLC, and I think culture as a regeneration tool is a compelling proposition. I wonder whether you sense that Labour and the Conservatives are both now recognising the creative industries as one of their priorities?

Brabin: Absolutely. If you’re looking for growth, invest in a sector that is already growing and grow it faster. The creative industries are one of the only growing sectors in West Yorkshire, and the fastest-growing in England outside London. Why wouldn’t we invest time and energy in it? Making it a priority has suddenly alerted people to the opportunities, economic and otherwise.

Channel 4 coming to Leeds was a real game-changer, but it wouldn’t have come without Bradford and the opportunity to access diverse talents. Its arrival has also developed a clustering of independent companies: EMI North, EMI’s first ever out-of-London office, is in Leeds. Production Park is Europe’s biggest and, I think, the only rehearsal space for global tours by musicians like Lady Gaga. We’re down to a small shortlist for the Croydon-based Brit School ▶



“In our vision, kids from the estate where I grew up can go the whole way and do anything that they want because all the opportunities are here”

to open a Brit School North in Bradford. And at Tileyard North they’re now developing huge warehouses next to the art gallery and creating a state-of-the-art music production centre.

Collectively, we can be a beacon of creativity – a clustering of creatives that all help each other. By funding the years of culture, we’re enabling talent to roll on, with opportunities on offer throughout the series of events. So, for example, if you’re an intern in Leeds 2023, then you go on to Wakefield Year of Culture as a producer, then you’re an executive producer at Bradford City of Culture, and then you work for Channel 4.

This is a unique moment for West Yorkshire, and if we don’t do this now, there will never be another opportunity.

Haldane: I wanted to ask about the investment zone and why you thought of it as a positive step towards growing the cluster that you mentioned?

Brabin: Absolutely. The way that we pitched the investment zone is we’d like to co-create it

with government, rather than having something off the shelf. We can’t forget that Canary Wharf was only successful because of the investment in transport: the DLR and the Jubilee line and so on. We have to get that from government, and that’s why mass transit is vital to our investment zone ambitions. So, I’m saying to government, “Do not let up on your commitment to mass transit.” That’s a massive investment proposition. But we’ve pitched our investment zones looking at the innovation arc, which is health tech up at the hospitals, but also Bradford has the highest number of AI and data analytics postgraduate students in the country.

But it can’t be just this one patch that ends up with people across Yorkshire flooding into that little piece of ground. We’ve got to have a more holistic view about how this is going to work. We’re flexible in what we can pitch, but digital, creative industries, health tech and AI also link with our ambitions around space. We’ve got Space Hub Yorkshire, which was launched a few months ago, so we’re in a good place.

Haldane: You touched upon mass transit. I thought I’d ask you about transport – something I know you feel passionately about. It’s sometimes said Bradford is the least well-connected city in the UK. Do you have a vision for what’s needed in the region?

Brabin: It is an issue we have been living with for far too long. Having a voice has been helpful because, as a commuter myself, I’ve been able to be furious on behalf of the public. We are losing people, investment and businesses – £2m a week – because of the TransPennine Express chaos. I want TransPennine to roll into Northern with the operator of last resort, but politically that doesn’t play well because it’s nationalising another rail network. But surely that has got to be a better outcome than what faces us.

My plan is that we have a new Manchester-to-Leeds line with that all-important stop in Bradford. You saw what happened in Birmingham: just a commitment from HS2 to go to Birmingham and suddenly investment flooded in. So, we need that new line and a bus network that works for the public and is interconnected with mass transit. I’ve been able to bring in the ‘Mayor’s Fares’, a £2 capped fare per single bus journey, but what I can’t do is stop bus companies cutting routes that don’t bring them enough profit. That is deeply frustrating.

My vision is for east–west interconnectivity that helps with connecting communities along the TransPennine line and a greater capacity for freight, and a great bus network that then feeds into mass transit that is a reliable, affordable, clean, green network. We have started the process. It’s long and arduous and may not kick off until 2028, but I am determined that, before the end of my second term – and hopefully I’ll come back for a second term – there will be spades in the ground on mass transit.

At the moment, we are a long way from that vision, and it’s impacting on everything, especially investment and access to culture. Only the other day I thought, “I really want to see that show, but can I guarantee that I can get a train home?” It’s hopeless. It impacts all of us on a daily basis.

Haldane: I want to end on an optimistic note because I know you’re a very optimistic person and it’s a tremendously important attribute in any leader. Could you end with some thoughts about what’s possible in the region, all the potential that can be unlocked?

Brabin: What would success look like? We were part of the history of manufacturing. We are at the heart of the UK and the heart of the north. We were game-changing when it came to the industrial revolution. We can be that again.

In our vision, kids from the estate where I grew up can go the whole way and do anything that they want because all the opportunities are here, and their family has the same life expectancy as others across the region. For too long it’s just been in the ‘too hard’ box that there are communities in West Yorkshire that are suffering bad health outcomes, aren’t earning enough and are living in poor housing.

Innovation is a priority, as well as creativity and creative problem solving. Being able to draw in investment but also allow our citizens to have access to the best opportunities. I think that is within our reach. We can close the health inequality gap, the opportunity gap, the social mobility gap, so that wherever you live in West Yorkshire, you have the same life chances. We can be seen not just nationally but internationally as the place to go for the smartest, the brightest, the warmest, the most optimistic, the most curious and the most creative citizens, who will help you bring your idea to fruition.

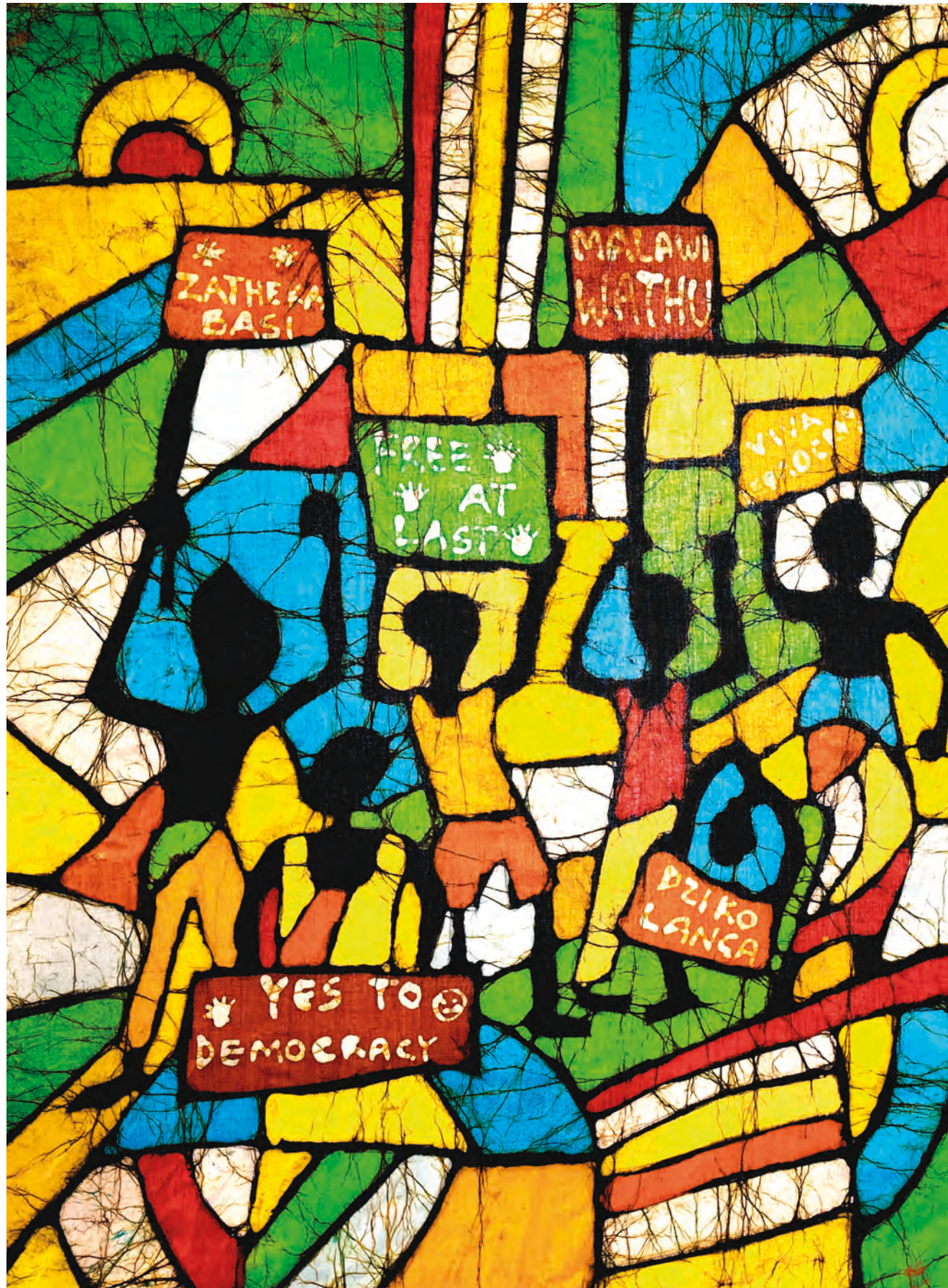
Mayors can be game-changers because we know our communities and we can do that bespoke tinkering at a local level that makes a huge difference. ■

Imagination Agents

Dr Helen Burns, FRSA, received a £2,000 Catalyst Seed Grant in January 2022 to develop Imagination Agents, a collaboration with Glasgow’s Whitehill Secondary School, the University of Dundee and artists Dr Cath Keay and Natalie Frost.

This artist-led school club engages young people to produce art installations in their local area as a response to environmental degradation and disregard. Imagination Agents encourages young people to understand and nurture their own imaginative development as a fundamental aspect of cognition and metacognition (thinking about thinking), within a vision to support environmental regeneration. The artistic process acts as a vehicle to support participants to develop imagination and agency, in the belief that the first is required for and can lead to the latter.

“Imagination is often regarded as a magical phenomenon, rather than as a cognitive capacity which can be educated,” said Dr Burns, Lecturer in the Education Department at the University of Dundee. “Art offers special opportunities in such an education, which is critical for all our futures.” She notes that the project will act as a pilot study within successive applications for further RSA and academic funding to continue this work at scale.



OUR MALAWI

One country's tipping point in the journey towards a free and fair democracy

By Singalilwe Chilemba

In the weeks that followed the general election held on 19 May 2019, the atmosphere in Malawi was thick with unrest and anticipation. The outcome that had declared incumbent president Arthur Peter Mutharika the winner was heavily contested and triggered a series of events that saw a peak in Malawi's fight for democracy.

The results of the elections were contested based on irregularities reported at polling stations (including the altering of result sheets with correction fluid), as well as several errors noted in the accounting and auditing of results submitted to the national tallying centre. This evidence, gathered from samples of results sheets from different polling stations, was enough to galvanise civil society groups to call for fresh elections and petition the resignation of the chairperson of the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC), Jane Ansah.

When the Human Rights Defenders Coalition (HRDC) began coordinating nationwide protests to demand electoral justice, Malawians took to the streets in the hundreds of thousands in response. The cities of Lilongwe, Blantyre and Mzuzu seethed with activity as thousands joined the marches to serve government officials with petitions demanding justice. While the protests started out peacefully, clashes between protesters and the police soon saw city streets descend into chaos. Tear gas and live ammunition were used on the protesters, who retaliated by hurling stones and starting fires. For weeks, it became impossible to carry out business as usual in the

major cities across the country as shops and institutions were shut down to avoid damage.

The refusal of Mutharika and Ansah to step down in the face of intense pressure from the ongoing mass demonstration led to a watershed moment: the opposition decided to join hands and take the case to the constitutional court. Led by Malawi Congress Party (MCP) president Lazarus Chakwera and United Transformation Movement (UTM) leader Saulos Chilima, the newly formed 'Tonse Alliance' argued that the irregularities were sufficient to overturn the results of the election.

Finally, it seemed, there was the necessary determination and resolve – at all levels of the Malawian populace – to ensure that justice would prevail.

A complicated history

Following the country's independence from Britain in 1964, MCP, under the leadership of Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, established a one-party rule that saw the country devolve into a dictatorship that lasted three decades. The party employed authoritarian and intimidation tactics to suppress opposition, restrict basic freedoms and consolidate power. A 1997 article by Julius O Ihonvbere detailed how the absolute control and repressive tactics under Banda's regime fostered "a climate of fear almost unparalleled anywhere in Africa, even in countries wracked by violence."

It was only in the 1990s that widespread protests over the increasing economic crisis and

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“Malawi’s success in establishing what many consider a peaceful democracy has been recognised globally”

international pressure condemning human rights violations pressured Banda to call a referendum, ushering in multi-party democracy. The first democratic elections were held in 1994 and the United Democratic Front (UDF) emerged victorious, with Bakili Muluzi becoming the first president under the new government and going on to serve for two terms.

While the next 15 years of relatively peaceful transfers of power in Malawi might appear, at first glance, to be a success, a closer look reveals a period of democracy riddled with challenges including in-fighting, nepotism and corruption, leading to protests and periodic unrest. Following the success of the student-led mass protests to overturn one-party rule (1992–93), Malawians once again took to the streets in 2002 to protest a proposed third term under Muluzi. Bingu wa Mutharika succeeded Muluzi as president in 2004 but, in 2011, during his second term, Malawians again turned out to protest poor economic management and governance by his administration; after Bingu’s sudden death in April 2012, his vice-president, Joyce Banda, was sworn into office to serve as the first female president of Malawi. In 2014, Bingu’s brother (and cabinet minister at the time), Arthur Peter Mutharika, was chosen to represent the DPP, following which he became the fifth president

of Malawi and served a single term until the contested May 2019 elections.

The rampant corruption uncovered during Joyce Banda’s term (dubbed ‘Cashgate’), as well as the socioeconomic challenges that the country continued to face under Arthur Peter Mutharika, all contributed to growing frustrations among citizens which were channelled through ongoing protests led by civil society groups. Attempts to hold leaders in government to account rarely yielded results. There was little hope that the fight to overturn the May 2019 elections would turn out any differently, but protesters and the opposition, represented by the Tonse Alliance, refused to relent.

Democratic tipping point

The mass demonstrations following the May 2019 elections continued over a period of nine months, alongside the hearing of the election case by the constitutional court, which finally concluded in February 2020. Sensing that the country was at a tipping point, Malawians eagerly awaited the judgment that would determine whether the results of the election would be upheld. Citizens across the country and abroad followed the developments closely, staying updated through national news outlets on television, radio and social media.

Finally, in a historic ruling delivered on 3 February 2020, five judges of the constitutional court passed a judgment annulling the results of the May 2019 election. Delivered in an intense 10-hour hearing, the judges cited “widespread, systematic and grave” irregularities and misconduct in the MEC’s management of the elections and gave the commission 150 days to make the necessary reforms in preparation to hold fresh elections.

With the world watching, Malawians returned to the polls on 23 June 2020, successfully ushering the Tonse Alliance into power. Lazarus Chakwera became Malawi’s sixth president and Saulos Chilima his vice-president. Supporters of the new government celebrated the result of their long, arduous months of protest, taking to the streets and social media to share in the victory.

What changed?

Several factors contributed to this significant evolution in Malawi’s democratic history. Chief among them was the freedom to organise and the efficiency of Malawi’s civil society in coordinating a response and calling for citizens to

serve their complaints through official channels. As one of the organisations at the helm of these efforts, the HRDC was critical in ensuring local and international focus remained on the election case by drawing attention to the issues and seeking support from citizens across all levels of Malawian society to hold the government and judicial system accountable.

The HRDC, created in 2017 to provide protection and support for human rights defenders, consists of several organisations, including the Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation, the Centre for the Development of People, and the Malawi Law Society. To organise the May 2019 mass demonstrations, the HRDC used community mobilisation efforts to challenge the election results. A March 2021 report published by Solidarity Action Network detailed that the HRDC “stepped in to unite activists and citizens across the country, mobilising calls for greater accountability, and using litigation strategies to protect the freedom of assembly”.

Another critical factor that contributed to this historic victory for democracy was the transparency upheld by the judicial system, which demonstrated a commitment to constitutionalism and the rule of law. Malawi’s constitution protects fundamental human rights and enforces an independent judiciary system. This commitment to democratic justice was demonstrated not only by the judgment itself, but by the disclosure of high-level bribery attempts and threats to which the presiding judges were subjected during the trial. The level of scrutiny surrounding the election case inspired by the mass protests is thought to have contributed significantly towards a more transparent judicial process and, therefore, a successful outcome.

These factors working together meant that a strong legal case led by the opposition was supported by civil society efforts to hold key players in government and the judiciary system accountable. This collective effort, combined with the commitment to the rule of law upheld by the constitutional court judges, created an environment that enabled democratic justice to prevail.

Following the ruling in the election case, Malawi’s success in establishing what many consider a peaceful democracy has been recognised globally. In 2020, the five constitutional judges were awarded the Chatham House prize (an annual honour awarded to those who have made a “significant contribution to international

relations”), in recognition of their “courage and independence in the defence of democracy.”

A vision for the future

While the overturning of the May 2019 elections was a key moment in Malawi and Africa’s political history that remains a resounding victory, the hope that was kindled in the public throughout the process has gradually dissipated. This follows increasing distrust in the new government for failing to honour campaign promises amid Malawi’s increasing economic challenges. The overburdened public health and education systems that are still recovering from the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic have been affected more recently by a cholera outbreak that the World Health Organization has declared the deadliest in the country’s history. Forex shortages, high (and rising) cost of living and inflation have led to growing frustration among Malawi’s citizens.

The fight against corruption continues, with attempts to undermine efforts by the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) following a recent case suggesting widespread corruption involving high-level officials from different government departments. The civil society movement seems to have lost the momentum which fuelled the May 2019 protests, with some activists within the HRDC leadership being appointed into government positions by the Tonse Alliance.

Malawi’s journey towards democracy has not been without its challenges, but united fronts and perseverance have often paid off. Some of the achievements that the country continues to benefit from include: the electoral system reforms that have ensured a more inclusive democratic approach; the independence of political institutions such as the judiciary and ACB; and strong civic participation and engagement – including a growing number of youth and women-led organisations that continue to fight for human rights in the country. Through a commitment to constitutionalism, rule of law and civil society engagement, Malawi has demonstrated growing potential in democratic governance from which other countries can draw important lessons.

The fight for democracy, however, remains far from over. As we await the next presidential elections in 2025, the hope is that Malawi continues to learn from its past successes and remains vigilant in the face of democratic injustice. ■

Artwork by Ellis Singano for the RSA. Ellis is a Malawian batik artist whose work has appeared in over 30 exhibitions

THE ECONOMICS OF CITIZEN SMITH

Strengthening local powers may be the key to rebuilding public trust in government and ushering in a new era of stability and prosperity

by Andy Haldane

In the late 1970s, the UK's most famous freedom fighter was not Nelson Mandela or Che Guevara. It was Wolfie Smith, activist for the Tooting Popular Front – or 'Citizen Smith' as he was known in the eponymous TV series. Citizen Smith's rallying cry was "Power to the People", with one arm raised in revolutionary salute. Half a century on, the same rallying cry (if not salute) can be heard from the UK's two main political parties.

After decades of stasis, the past 20 years have seen significant, if incremental, progress towards increasing subnational powers in the UK. That momentum has gathered pace recently. For example, last year the government committed to give every English region a devolution deal, with London-like powers, by 2030. And former prime minister Gordon Brown's report on devolution, also published last year, proposed sweeping new local powers and has since been endorsed by the Labour party.

For the first time in living memory, the two main political parties are playing leapfrog in their devolution ambitions – in prospect a potentially seismic shift in UK governance, and the largest for perhaps a century. This is overdue. It is also necessary if economic growth, locally and nationally, and trust in politics and policy, locally and nationally, is to be restored.

A little history

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, governance of the UK was highly decentralised. Power sat locally, often in parish councils. Government was small and local. So, too, were urban centres and business and commerce, with the latter largely following an artisanal model. The role and scale of central government in people's everyday lives was modest, with very few public goods, from transport infrastructure to health and social security, available at the national level.

During the Industrial Revolution, that all changed. Money and people gravitated to new industrial hubs typically located in cities. Resources across the UK centralised and the country urbanised. Where money and people led, power followed and began centralising. Some of this newfound power was held in local government. A sequence of local government acts during the 19th century established a two-tier system at the county and district level, with strengthened powers to spend and tax. This occurred alongside a much larger and more expansive role for central government, whose share of national income doubled between the 18th and 19th centuries, creating a three-tier cake of governance.

The 20th century saw various attempts to simplify and harmonise the UK's complex, ▶



three-tier administrative geography. For example, the 1966 Royal Commission on Local Government (the Redcliffe-Maud Commission) proposed creating eight regional councils and a move away from two-tier local government. It never took full effect. Likewise, the Local Government Commission for England, established in 1992 by then-Environment Secretary Michael Heseltine, proposed so-called ‘unitarisation’. This, too, was only partially successful.

The incoming Labour government at the end of the 20th century made strides in a similar direction, establishing nine Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and a Greater London Authority headed by an elected mayor. New, devolved administrations were proposed in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with accompanying (if limited) powers. These moves were against a backcloth of a still-expanding central government machine, whose share of national income again doubled during the course of the 20th century.

Entering the 21st century, the pendulum swing towards devolution has continued, albeit erratically. The incoming coalition government in 2010 abolished the RDAs and replaced them with a patchwork of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), ‘City Deals’ and the emergence of the so-called Northern Powerhouse. More recently, we have seen further consolidation of local powers in combined local authorities, often headed by an elected mayor with delegated powers.

There are now 10 regional mayors across England, covering around 35% of the English population, in addition to the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The government’s white paper on levelling up published last year proposed a further rollout of devolution and a further six new mayoralities have since been announced. It also proposed a deepening of delegated powers, starting with the ‘trailblazer’ deals for Greater Manchester and the West Midlands announced earlier this year.

Economics of devolution

Although the history of devolution has been complex, its economics are surprisingly simple. In theory, the optimal degree of decentralisation of powers to the subnational level rests on two competing forces. Both apply to a country or nation state, but at the subnational or community level, too. In practice, choosing the optimal degree of decentralisation of

decision-making over taxation and spending involves weighing these competing forces.

The first is risk-sharing. A nation state with centralised powers to spend and tax can use these resources to share risks facing citizens at the subnational level. This redistributive role can be important for smoothing out differences in subnational outcomes and for cushioning the impact of shocks that affect places differently, such as the recent Covid and cost-of-living crises. In short, central government can smooth out the subnational bumps facing its citizens which, in the UK in particular, have been large historically.

The second effect, working in the opposite direction, is local autonomy. The benefits of this include enhanced local information, benefits that are larger the more localised the problems. A second benefit is enhanced local agency – stronger incentives – when designing and delivering local solutions. And a third benefit is improved coordination across the different arms of policy, something more easily done at the local rather than central level.

How does the UK compare on this cost/benefit calculus? The starting point is a very high degree of centralisation of both spending and taxation powers. In the UK, around 80% of all spending decisions, and around 95% of all tax decisions, are made centrally rather than locally. Notwithstanding the progress made so far this century, this makes the UK an outlier by comparison with other advanced economies, where the averages are 62% and 72%, respectively.

The UK’s regional differences are also more extreme than in many other advanced economies, looking across a broad range of economic and social metrics such as income, health and connectivity. On the face of it, that might justify the UK having a large central government able to pool and then redistribute resources subnationally – from rich to poor, healthy to sick, or connected to disconnected regions. In practice, it is unclear how effectively central government in the UK has played that role.

Spatial differences across the UK are wider than at any time in the past century and have been widening for the past 70 years. Far from stemming that tide, some central government spending has exacerbated them. For example, central government spending on housing, arts and culture, transport, and digital infrastructure and research and development has had a strong

historical skew towards richer, better-served parts of the UK, rather than poorer ones. In theory, central government should help reduce the risks facing poorly performing places; in practice, it has often exacerbated them.

And it is not just the UK’s regional divides that are wide and have been widening. Differences at the local level are not only still larger but have been widening faster. The UK’s economic and social geography is hyper-local, with pockets of affluence and deprivation often sitting cheek by jowl. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the UK’s cities, home to the greatest concentrations of both wealth and health and poverty and homelessness.

These hyper-local patterns in economic and social geography have also been exacerbated by the UK’s concentrated and centralised model of governance. This has made it far less likely that these problems can be identified (due to lack of local information) and remediated (due to lack of local agency) than if powers had been held at the local level.

International evidence is revealing here. Looking across a wide range of countries, there is a negative relationship between degree of centralisation of decision-making and the extent of spatial disparities. On average, devolution tends to shrink regional differences. It also tends to boost both local and national growth, as more potential – among local people, businesses and government – is unleashed.

Strikingly, the UK sits at one end of the spectrum on these comparisons, with simultaneously low degrees of devolution, high levels of spatial difference and low levels of economic growth. International experience suggests this confluence is no coincidence. Historically, the UK has struck the wrong balance between the competing forces of risk-sharing and local autonomy, widening geographic differences.

This keeps local resources among the public, private and civil society sectors under-utilised relative to their potential, holding back opportunity for local citizens and stunting growth locally. It has also contributed to rising political discontent. These deeply entrenched forces, operating over many decades, explain the pendulum shift in governance underway across all four corners of the UK.

Looking ahead

How much further should the devolution pendulum swing? And in which direction?



“In theory, central government should help reduce the risks facing poorly performing places; in practice, it has often exacerbated them”

Devolution is assuredly no panacea for the UK’s economic and social ills. Indeed, international evidence suggests clearly that badly executed devolution can be counter-productive for local and national fortunes. So how are these pitfalls best avoided, and the opportunities of devolution best harnessed?

Single financial settlement

Devolving powers is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for success. Without devolved monies, local powers will be ineffective. At present, local government finance seriously constricts local effectiveness in the UK. Formulas for determining local government finance are out of date, and of inadequate scale, to address the UK’s spatial differences. And other local financing mechanisms – such as the plethora of over 100 centrally allocated pots – are diffuse, complex and often unsuitable for levelling up.

The Levelling Up Fund, introduced by the government in 2020, is a case in point. While its aims are laudable, its design makes it ineffective



“The question here is: which services are most effectively delivered at the community level, while avoiding multiple tiers of decision-making with its associated costs?”

in meeting them. Its competitive bid structure is a recipe not only for disappointment but has often seen funding flowing to those areas able to produce the best bids – often, large metropolitan areas – rather than those most in need. This is contrary to the aims of levelling up. The competitive process also imposes a large deadweight burden on those whose bids are unsuccessful.

This may now be changing. As part of their new trailblazer deals, Greater Manchester and West Midlands were offered a single financial settlement from 2025, an option now also available to other mayoral combined authorities. In time, this will not only simplify and lengthen funding for local government, but will also give them

far greater flexibility over the use of these funds, enabling monies to be tailored to local priorities without the deadweight bureaucratic burden of bidding.

Powers and people

The trailblazer deals, and London’s experience over the past 20 years, have expanded the envelope of delegated powers at the subnational level. These now extend to health, transport, employment support, innovation, policing and crime. Over time, it is likely those delegated powers will be replicated across England as the number of elected mayoralties expands. But even these changes would leave the UK as one of the most centralised countries in the Western world,

particularly in respect of taxation powers.

Gordon Brown’s recent report for the Labour party on devolution suggested a more sweeping set of devolution powers over both spending and taxation. These included increased powers over skills and further education, energy and the environment, housing development, childcare, culture and wellbeing.

At a very practical level, the case for further evolution of taxation powers is a nuanced one. On the one hand, fiscal devolution makes sense in granting local leaders the autonomy to raise local monies to finance local regeneration. It also helpfully aligns local incentives, with any decision to boost local spending balanced against the need to raise local taxes to finance that spending. This is important from an accountability and transparency perspective.

On the other hand, as Brown’s report noted, caution is needed before proceeding too speedily down the path of tax devolution. That is because, with large pre-existing differences in incomes across the UK, poor regions with a low tax base could see their spending depressed if they were asked to raise all or some income locally; that could worsen disparities within and between regions. This does not diminish the case for devolution, but it does suggest caution in the speed with which it is approached.

Accountability

Any governance model relies for its success on appropriate degrees of accountability. UK devolution needs to avoid one demographic deficit (an imbalance between central and local powers) morphing into another (an imbalance between local powers and local accountabilities). That would be a recipe for disenchantment with politics shifting from central to local government. This lack of local accountability has been an achilles heel of devolution, in the UK and internationally, in the past.

Avoiding this risk means strengthening local accountabilities and transparency in line with the move to increased local powers. There are already some steps being taken in this direction. The newly created Office for Local Government (OfLog) is one attempt to fill the accountability gap. With luck, OfLog will promote a culture of learning about good practice across regions, as well as providing checks and balances on how monies are being used.

But efforts beyond OfLog and the local ballot box will also be needed. This is likely to include

heightened Westminster scrutiny, improved data on local outcomes, and strengthened local media scrutiny.

Double devolution

Finally, while most efforts have so far been concentrated on devolution of powers to the regional or mayoral level, there is a debate to be had about appropriate degrees of sub-regional delegation to the community level – so-called ‘double devolution’. There is an element of back to the future about this debate, bearing in mind the UK’s localised model of governance that predated the Industrial Revolution.

The question is: which services are most effectively delivered at the community level, while avoiding multiple tiers of decision-making with its associated costs? Progress is already being made towards double devolution – for example, through the Community Ownership Fund giving local residents control over local assets and, most recently, the proposed Community Wealth Fund. These initiatives put local residents at the heart of spending decisions for their communities.

Power to the people?

Today, both the main UK political parties are competing for virtue in their plans for devolution. As rare as it is welcome, this means there is a good chance devolution will have support beyond the next election. As shrinking the UK’s deeply entrenched spatial divides will be a cross-generational endeavour, this cross-party support is crucial.

At present, the UK has greater stability and longevity in regional, rather than in national, politics. Not coincidentally, there are also greater levels of trust in, and collaboration between, the regions of the UK than in and between its main political parties. Taken alongside the country’s large and widening spatial divides, this is fertile ground for a further significant shift in the tectonic plates of UK governance.

This is long overdue. The democratic deficits felt by many parts of the UK have generated a deep sense of disenfranchisement from politics and policy. They have also constrained local opportunities for regeneration of people and places. A weakened Westminster and Whitehall should not resist this tide. Indeed, the best hope of rebuilding trust in both comes from strengthening the hand of local leaders.

Slowly but surely, power may be returning to the people. ■

Artwork by **Helen Friel** for the RSA. Helen is a UK-based paper engineer, illustrator and author. She designs and illustrates interactive and immersive books for both children and adults, including the first pop-up book sent into space



LEARNING TO LEAD

One organisation's blueprint for engaging young people in the political process

By Harriet Andrews

One of the key questions at the heart of our politics is how to create a democratic system that does not just create opportunities for all citizens to engage, but one with which all citizens *choose* to engage. Persistent inequalities still dictate who takes part in our democracy. People who rent their homes, people with disabilities, low-income or minority ethnic communities and young people are all less likely to be included on the electoral register. In the 2019 general election, 47% of 18- to 25-year-olds voted, compared with 75% of those 65 and older.

Thankfully, the worn narrative that young people are apathetic towards politics has largely disappeared. Young people's commitment to Black Lives Matter and the School Strikes for Climate, for instance, has demonstrated their willingness to engage and their knowledge of social and political issues. Yet, young people remain largely disengaged from traditional political systems. While this is partially due to the way these systems communicate and engage, often using impenetrable language and traditions that feel alien or outdated, even the removal of these barriers reveals a more fundamental issue: a breakdown in the relationship between politicians and young citizens.

Here at The Politics Project, we have been working for eight years to understand and improve the relationship between young people and politicians, including through our flagship programme, Digital Surgeries. The programme's ambition is simple: we want every young person to have a meaningful conversation with a politician during their time at school. Currently, only 5%

of young people engage with a politician during their time in education, rising to about 12% for privately educated students. We address this gap by creating these opportunities. To date, we have supported over 500 conversations between 300 politicians and 10,000 young people from over 400 schools across the UK.

Digital Surgeries supports groups of 10–30 young people to have an hour-long video call with a politician who represents them. Crucially, young people are supported (through workshops in school) to prepare for the meeting by learning about the guest politician and crafting relevant questions to ask. This helps them feel informed and in control, producing more meaningful interactions from which both sides benefit.

We work with all levels of politician, from local councillors to cabinet ministers. We also work with politicians from all political parties, helping to expose young people to points of view they may not have encountered before. While most Digital Surgeries involve young people speaking to the politician representing their ward or constituency, we have also supported them to give evidence to parliamentary select committees, providing a rare chance for parliament's work to be informed by the young people it represents. We are in the process of rolling out a version of the programme in Welsh schools, funded by the Welsh government, and we also support US politicians to engage with UK students.

We believe these engagements act as a 'civic inoculation', empowering young people to feel comfortable contacting a politician later in life and serving as a counterweight to the stereotype that

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“Part of the problem is that our democratic systems have not kept pace with technological change”

all politicians are corrupt or ‘in it for themselves’. Our work does not and is not designed to create an uncritical view of politicians. Rather, it humanises them, makes them more approachable. It shifts the idea of political institutions as a set of arcane rules and distant buildings to a (far more relatable) collection of individuals. One student commented they were surprised that the politician they spoke to was “just like us and not posh”.

What’s more, the process of preparing for and undertaking these meetings creates numerous benefits for young people, including building political knowledge and understanding, improving speaking and listening skills, and boosting confidence.

Our evidence also shows us what works for building relationships and trust. For example, the most impactful engagements are those that feel informal, are led by young people, and take place in small groups. Our evaluation data shows that young people in groups of fewer than 20 are 15% more likely to trust the politician with whom they are speaking, while those in groups of over 60 are 4% less likely.

We also know that an effective way for politicians to build trust is to take action on behalf of the young people they meet and speak with. This could range from making sure a broken streetlamp gets fixed to raising a relevant issue in parliament.

The Politics Project has embraced digital platforms, such as Zoom, to hold conversations between young people and politicians, finding them to be just as effective as face-to-face interactions, sometimes more so. Young people who may be nervous about speaking with a politician often find this form of communication less intimidating. It is certainly more practical, as it opens up Monday through Thursday for engagements with constituents while MPs are in Westminster and reduces the need for travel.

Many schools prefer virtual engagements, too, as this eliminates the need to ‘roll out the red

carpet’ and involve senior staff in supporting a visit. Research from the University of California shows that engaging via digital platforms can help with difficult conversations, supporting participants to discuss challenging topics in a controlled environment.

These findings highlight how rarely engagements between citizens and politicians are properly designed for actually building trust and relationships. Often when politicians do interact with students, it is in school assemblies, where they speak to hundreds of students at a time. While this may engage a greater number of students, our findings suggest these mostly unilateral interactions are unlikely to result in meaningful relationship-building.

Part of the problem is that our democratic systems have not kept pace with technological change. The norms of political engagement were established pre-internet. In the 20th century of analogue broadcast media, politicians shared their ideas through speeches to live crowds or television or radio audiences, the larger the better. These formats remain the primary ways that politicians communicate with the public, regardless of the benefits of more innovative modes of engagement, including younger audiences.

What might it look like if we could shift this political culture? If an MP were to give two hours of their week to meaningfully speak to 50 disengaged constituents, they could speak to over 20,000 people in a parliamentary term, over a quarter of the average parliamentary constituency. It would require a systematic approach in which politicians reach out to constituents, rather than just engaging with those that contact them. It would also require more resources, as politicians’ offices would need help to coordinate, support and facilitate these engagements.

At The Politics Project, we are working to deliver this cultural shift. We want politicians across the political spectrum to recognise the importance of youth voice and reimagine how they engage with young people. We also want to support schools and youth clubs to do more to equip young people with the knowledge, skills and confidence to shape the decisions that affect them. In a healthy democracy this cannot be an opt-in or simply a ‘nice to have’.

Our work demonstrates the benefits of developing this more inclusive national conversation. The prize to be won is a healthier democracy, where all citizens choose to engage with political systems and everyone’s voice counts. ■

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Backpack styled by Vera Wachter, age 12, and Una Wachter, age 15



OUT OF BUSINESS

How a 'big myth' sold the American people on the magic of the marketplace

By Naomi Oreskes and Erik M Conway

Ever since the rise to power of Ronald Reagan in the US and Margaret Thatcher in the UK, American and British public policies have been heavily influenced by a 'big myth'. It is the idea that markets are not just economically efficient, but that they can be trusted to work wisely and well. In fact, so well that we don't need government much at all. Governments just need to 'get out of the way' and let markets 'do their magic'.

We call this view 'market fundamentalism', because it often takes on the quality of religious faith, as when the New York University professor Jonathan Haidt – a regular on the US talk show circuit and at the World Economic Forum at Davos – argues that it's "not crazy to worship markets", or the Chicago-school economist Deirdre McCloskey (only slightly tongue-in-cheek) crosses herself at the mention of Adam Smith. Margaret Atwood puts it this way in her book *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth Management*: at some point in the 20th century "people began substituting something called 'the Market' for God, attributing the same characteristics to it: all-knowingness, always-rightness, and the ability to make something called 'corrections,' which, like the divine punishment of old, had the effect of wiping out a great many people." Smith's 'invisible hand' was an obvious allusion to the hand of God.

Market-based economies have produced substantive wealth; they have also created devastating problems. From the "dark satanic

mills" and monopolistic capitalism of the late 19th century, through the twin crises of crippling workplace injury and the Great Depression of the early 20th century, to our current breathtaking income inequality and dangerous climate disruption, market failures have been frequent and consequential. To the extent that these failures have been remedied, it has generally been not by markets correcting themselves, but by government action to constrain markets, redistribute wealth, or provide for human needs that markets neglect.

Why have so many people accepted a worldview that history has shown to be inadequate at best? One part of the answer involves a long history of propaganda – led by American business leaders – to persuade us of its truth. The story begins in the early 20th century, with a debate over electricity.

Electricity for all

The introduction of electricity in the early 20th century revolutionised transportation and recreation. Cities installed electric lights that made for safe walking at night; electric streetcars enabled the development of suburbs, amusement parks at the ends of their lines, and outings in the country. Electricity made Henry Ford's assembly line possible, along with countless other industrial innovations. It also transformed the American home, replacing dirty and dangerous gas lamps and paving the way for electrical appliances that made household

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Erik M Conway is a historian of science and technology who works for the California Institute of Technology

This article has been excerpted and adapted for the RSA from their new book, *The Big Myth: How American Business Taught Us to Loathe Government and Love the Free Market*

labour less arduous. By the early 1920s, most urban Americans had electricity in their homes. But rural America had been neglected.

Electricity generation in the US was mostly the work of entrepreneurs – famously Thomas Edison and George Westinghouse – and the private utilities that put their machinery to work, such as Edison Electric. The men and their companies were extraordinarily successful; Edison and Westinghouse became household names. But they had not found a way to bring electricity to rural customers at a profit. In 1925, General Electric put it this way: “the purchasing power of... 1.9 million [farmers] is too low to put them in the potential customer class.”

In many other countries, electricity was viewed not as a commodity to be bought and sold at a profit, but a public good that demanded governance to ensure equitable distribution. The contrast in results was stark: by the 1920s, nearly 70% of northern European farmers had electricity, but fewer than 10% of US farmers did. To add insult to injury, many private utilities were corrupt, overcharging customers and then cooking the books to make it seem it wasn't so. In this context, leading Americans began to argue that government needed to get involved in electricity generation and distribution. In response, the National Electric Light Association (NELA) launched a massive campaign to persuade the American people that their needs could be best met if the government not only left electricity markets alone, but all markets. They would do this by insinuating their views into American education.

'Expert' influence

The NELA academic campaign had three major elements: first, they recruited experts to produce studies that 'proved' (contrary to what most independent observers had found) that private electricity was cheaper than public electricity. NELA found willing propagandists in faculties across the country. A professor at the University of Colorado was paid \$1,692.33 – about a full year's academic salary – for a survey of costs at municipally owned power plants in Colorado; not surprisingly, its conclusions were unfavourable to the municipal plants. At the University of Iowa, an electrical engineering professor was paid to prepare a series of reports favouring private electricity generation; NELA distributed the report “just as widely as we could legitimately”. It would be years before Americans

learnt these studies had been commissioned by the electricity industry and that their authors had been told what they needed to say.

NELA executives then moved on to their second phase: rewriting American textbooks and, in effect, American history. They recruited and paid academics to rewrite textbooks to make them more enthusiastic about private electricity and enterprise capitalism, in general, and pressured publishers to modify or withdraw textbooks that NELA found objectionable. Realising that pressuring academics and publishers might be considered inappropriate, NELA worked to gain cooperation from large publishers first, on the theory that once they were “straightened out and are working with us, the small publishers will naturally fall in line”. When a new text proved satisfactory, NELA or its members paid for copies to be widely distributed. In Missouri, for example, the St. Joseph Gas Company helped pay for copies of a new book to be sent to every high school principal in the state.

While NELA shills sang the praises of competitive markets, NELA's short-term goal was to prevent competition from municipal utilities. The long-term goal was to foster not just a positive view of the American electricity industry, but a positive view of capitalism and a negative view of government engagement in economic affairs. In this context, NELA introduced two ideas that would prove crucial in nearly all later arguments about the virtues of free-market capitalism and the dangers of government action in the marketplace. The first was the allegation that government involvement in the marketplace was a departure from US history. The second was the claim that free-market capitalism was the embodiment of freedom, writ large, and that any restriction on the freedom of any business would put the American public on a slippery slope to tyranny. In later testimony to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), observers noted that the secretary of NELA's Connecticut Committee on Public Service Information had admitted that industry statements were “intended [both] to discredit municipal ownership”, and to influence children (as future voters) to reject any thoughts sympathetic to state ownership and regulation.

The third component of the academic campaign was direct intervention in university programmes to develop pro-*laissez faire*, anti-regulatory curricula. Programmes of 'reciprocal relations' were established across the US, including at Washington State University, Penn

State, Harvard, Northwestern, and Purdue; state agricultural colleges in Nebraska, Colorado and Missouri; and the Smithsonian Institution. The sums offered to support those relations were substantial: in 1925, Northwestern received \$25,000; in 1928, Harvard received \$30,000 – the equivalent of about \$500,000 (£400,000) today. The goal was to support the development of courses and programmes in business and economics whose curricula were organised around principles of free enterprise and private property as the foundations for economic growth, prosperity and freedom. Influencing what was taught in colleges and universities would be the ultimate 'win' for NELA. As one executive put it, “The Colleges can say things that we cannot say and be believed.”

The misinformation blueprint

On the surface, NELA lost its fight; it was discredited and disbanded. But it regrouped as the Edison Electric Institute, which exists today and remains a powerful political lobby. Despite New Deal rural electrification, the United States today still has a predominantly (about 90%) private electricity system that is less strongly regulated than in many other countries. On average, customers of publicly owned utilities pay about 10% less than customers of investor-owned utilities and receive more reliable service. When attempts were made in the 1990s to deregulate the system entirely, it was a disaster for consumers. The Enron company gamed the system before going bankrupt, and several of its executives went to jail for fraud, conspiracy and insider trading. Electricity deregulation also proved a disaster for the people of Texas: when the state's power grid failed in the face of an extreme winter storm in 2021, it left more than 700 dead and somewhere between \$80bn and \$130bn (£64bn and £104bn) in damages.

The core arguments developed by NELA have also been used by other industry groups, most notably tobacco and fossil fuels. A BBC investigation recently showed how the American gas industry is once again claiming that government action to address a market failure – in this case the social cost of carbon – is a threat to personal freedom, an example of government 'overreach'. And it's not just the gas industry. “They're not taking my gas stove,” declared West Virginia's Democratic Senator Joe Manchin. Of course, no one is proposing to 'take' anything away from anyone. The reality

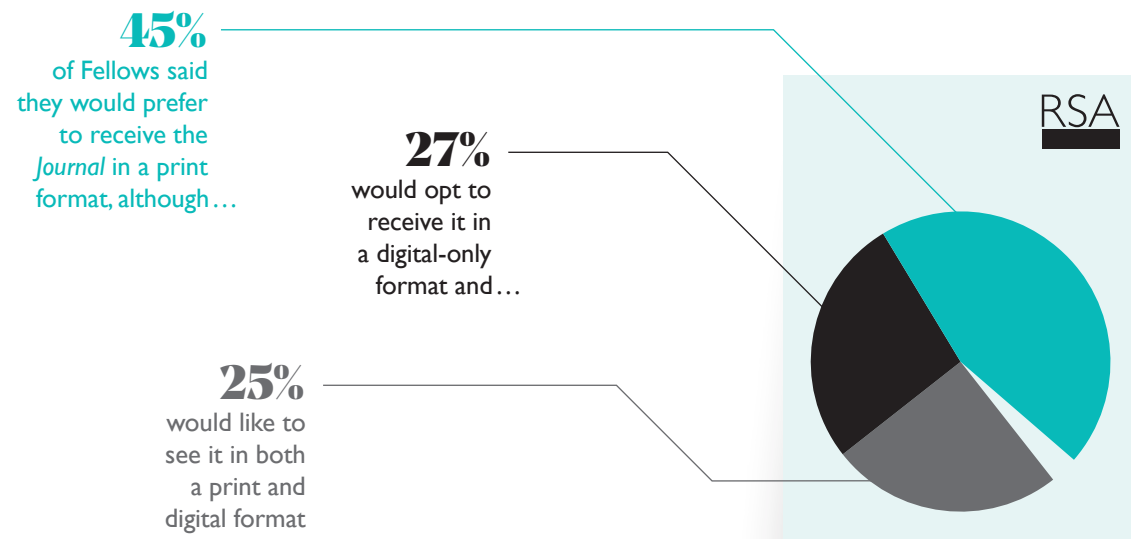


“NELA's... long-term goal was to foster not just a positive view of the American electricity industry, but a positive view of government engagement in economic affairs”

is that if we do not do something to stop the unfolding climate crisis, many of us are going to lose a lot more than a gas stove.

Seeing the light

Market failures are a feature, not a bug, of capitalism. To point that out is not to be a socialist, but a realist. The central failing of a good deal of current thinking – and not just market fundamentalism but also mainstream business thinking – is to brush this reality aside, and claim, for example, as *The Wall Street Journal* recently did, that the only way to address climate change (and by implication, other pressing challenges) is through “the mostly unregulated progress of markets and technology”. The time has come for a serious discussion of how to rethink and reform capitalism to deal seriously with the social and environmental costs of capitalism. ■



YOU TALKED, WE LISTENED

The RSA responds to feedback on the *Journal* from over 2,000 Fellows who completed a recent reader survey

By Mike Thatcher

Fellows have indicated their support for the *Journal* in a reader survey, with 86% of respondents describing the quarterly publication as an important part of their Fellowship and over half saying they always read it.

The survey, completed by more than 2,000 Fellows, found that 24% considered the *Journal* a 'very important' component of their Fellowship, 35% said it was 'important' and 27% 'somewhat important'. Around half of respondents rated the *Journal* at eight or higher on a zero-to-ten quality scale.

In response to open questions within the survey, Fellows described the *Journal* as a

"quality publication", with "stimulating and engaging" content and "brilliant artwork".

This endorsement follows from the *Journal*'s successful performance in the Corporate Content Awards Europe 2023. Along with Wardour, the RSA's content agency partner, the *Journal* claimed silver in the 'best long-term use of content' and 'best branded content publication' categories, and bronze in the 'best use of print' category.

According to reader survey respondents, the *Journal* was the second most preferred way for Fellows to keep in touch with the RSA, with 69% of respondents ranking it in their top three. Fifteen per cent said they 'always' read the publication in depth, 41% always read 'at

least some of it', 12% 'usually' read it and 10% 'occasionally' read it.

Sixty-five per cent agreed that the *Journal* introduced them to new ideas and thinking, while 74% confirmed that it updated them on the work of the RSA.

The survey also identified some areas for growth. For instance, only 32% agreed that the *Journal* inspired them to get involved with the RSA. Responses to the open questions also suggested that there should be more focus on the arts than the social sciences, that the content could be more accessible, and that the text is sometimes difficult to read.

In response to your feedback, we have already begun incorporating more articles about the arts and are working to refresh the balance of content so that it is still challenging but also accessible to a wider audience. More practically, the font size has been increased from this issue to improve readability.

To help guide the strategic direction of the *Journal*, the RSA has established an editorial board, with membership comprising Fellows, external specialists and RSA senior leaders (including Chief Executive Andy Haldane). I have also recently joined the RSA as Editorial Manager with a remit to improve accessibility

and ensure that you, the Fellows, are always at the heart of the commissioning process.

The editorial board will ensure that the *Journal* continues to be an internationally renowned publication that reflects the world as it is as well as showcasing the world as it could be. It will help the *Journal* to represent the best of the RSA, excite and engage Fellows, and support the scope of the RSA's Design for Life mission.

Print still preferred

Many of the open comments highlighted that Fellows value the printed copy of the *Journal*. This was backed up by the survey results, with 45% saying they would prefer to receive the *Journal* in a print format, although 27% would opt to have it in a digital-only format and 25% would like to see it in both a print and digital format.

The RSA understands these different preferences and concerns over the environmental impact of producing a printed publication for Fellows based across the globe. We do print the *Journal* on paper that has been carbon offset through the World Land Trust, but there is always more that can be done.

There will be more to say on this in future issues of the *Journal* – including our plans for a more extensive digital experience. ■

Mike Thatcher is Editorial Manager at the RSA

ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

Could citizens' assemblies present a new model for the future of political decision-making?

by Claudia Chwalisz

What is the role of political leadership in a new democratic paradigm defined by citizen participation, representation by lot and deliberation? What is or should be the role and relationship of politicians and political parties with citizens? What does a new approach to activating citizenship (in its broad sense) through practice and education entail? These are some questions that I am grappling with, having worked on democratic innovation and citizens' assemblies for over a decade, with my views evolving greatly over time.

First, a definition. A citizens' assembly is a bit like jury duty for policy. It is a broadly representative group of people selected by lottery (sortition) who meet for at least four to six days over a few months to learn about an issue, weigh trade-offs, listen to one another and find common ground on shared recommendations.

To take a recent example, the French Citizens' Assembly on End of Life comprised 184 members, selected by lot, who deliberated for 27 days over the course of four months. Their mandate was to recommend whether, and if so how, existing legislation about assisted dying, euthanasia and related end-of-life matters should be amended. The assembly heard from more than 60 experts, deliberated with one another, and found 92% consensus on 67 recommendations, which they formulated and delivered to President Emmanuel Macron on 3 April 2023. As of November 2021, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has counted almost

600 citizens' assemblies for public decision-making around the world, addressing complex issues from drug policy reform to biodiversity loss, urban planning decisions, climate change, infrastructure investment, constitutional issues such as abortion and more.

I believe citizens' assemblies are a key part of the way forward. I believe the lack of agency people feel to be shaping their lives and their communities is at the root of the democratic crisis – leading to ever-growing numbers of people exiting the formal political system entirely, or else turning to extremes (they often have legitimate analysis of the problems we face, but are not offering genuine solutions, and are often dangerous in their perpetuation of divisiveness and sometimes even violence). This is also related to a feeling of a lack of dignity and belonging, perpetuated in a culture where people look down on others with moral superiority, and humiliation abounds, as Amanda Ripley explains in her work on 'high conflict'. She distinguishes 'high conflict' from 'good conflict', which is respectful, necessary, and generative, and occurs in settings where there is openness and curiosity. In this context, our current democratic institutions are fuelling divisions, their legitimacy is weakened, and trust is faltering in all directions (of people in government, of government in people and of people in one another).

If the deep roots of the democratic crisis are about agency, dignity, belonging, complexity, curiosity, and trust, there is a need to develop



Claudia Chwalisz is the Founder and CEO of DemocracyNext, an international non-profit, non-partisan research and action institute, and is an Obama Leader Europe 2023. Previously, Claudia was the Innovative Citizen Participation Lead at the OECD



“We need deliberative spaces that allow people to truly listen to one another and to be heard, to recognise and acknowledge each other”

new democratic cultures, practices, processes, and institutions that help enable all those things.

We need deliberative spaces that allow people to truly listen to one another and to be heard, to recognise and acknowledge each other, even in difference, to grapple with complexity and spark curiosity – in ideas as well as in why others believe what they do; to have empathy and also to be able to do the hard work of finding common ground on the shared challenges we face.

This is why I have become convinced of the power and value of citizens’ assemblies in creating the epistemic conditions for diverse and broadly representative groups of people to be able to consider complex policy and political issues, and to find common ground for the common good.

A longer view

I once viewed citizens’ assemblies as a necessary complement to strengthen representative democracy as we conceive of it today. However, conducting a deeper analysis of hundreds of assemblies when I was at the OECD, and being involved in the design of the world’s first permanent citizens’ chambers with people

selected by lot, changed my perspective. The more fundamental issue is that a system defined by elections, with political parties and politicians, is designed for short-termism, for debate, for conflict and for polarisation. It puts re-election goals and party logic ahead of the common good. Adding on new forms of democratic institutions like citizens’ assemblies to an electoral system does not address the underlying democratic problems of an elections-based system.

The locus of power needs to shift

We have a wealth of evidence today that citizens’ assemblies are effective and democratic – leading to better decisions by leveraging our collective intelligence – and that they are fair and legitimate, recognising people’s agency and establishing political equality. But one-off assemblies are not changing the system. There is a need to shift political and legislative power to institutionalised citizens’ assemblies so that they can eventually become the heart of our democratic systems, defining a new democratic paradigm.

When citizens’ assemblies are taking place on all sorts of issues, at all levels of government, and everybody has the civic privilege and responsibility of being an assembly member at some point in their lives, then we will have another kind of democracy. Building new deliberative institutions that are empowered can lead to a transformative change of our democratic culture, practices and collective decision-making mechanisms.

Does this mean we only need citizens’ assemblies? Of course not. Assemblies need to be connected to more participatory and direct forms of democracy, and a place remains for institutions where people are selected by election or appointment. But there is a compelling argument for why citizens’ assemblies should be at the heart of the democratic system, defining a new democratic paradigm of sortition and deliberation, in the same way that the old paradigm is defined by elections, even though they are not the only governance mechanism that is in place.

Leading questions

If we accept the premise that a new democratic paradigm is defined by new institutions with everyday people selected by sortition, rotating their responsibility to represent others and be represented in turn, and deliberating to find common ground, there is an important question

about what political leadership means in this context. It might look like stepping back, acknowledging that politicians don’t know it all, making room at the table, sharing decision-making power with citizens and creating conditions for collective intelligence to thrive.

What is the role of political leaders today to usher in and steward this change?

This change is already under way, led by the most innovative and forward-looking leaders, who recognise that the role of politicians and elected institutions today is evolving. The hundreds of examples collected by the OECD were all initiated by people in positions of power, with authority to act on citizens’ recommendations.

The world’s first institutionalised assemblies were also initiated by politicians. The world’s first permanent citizens’ chamber in Ostbelgien, the German-speaking Community of Belgium, was created through the initiative of the president of the parliament and president of the government (from two different political parties), and was established through a unanimous vote in parliament, across the six party lines.

Furthermore, the many national-level assemblies, such as Ireland’s recurring assemblies, most recently on drug policy reform, biodiversity loss, devolution and gender equality, as well as France’s assemblies on end of life and climate change, are also being driven by the elected officials in charge. Another approach is one taken by the Agora party in Belgium, whose sole programmatic focus centres on maximising deliberation, both internally and externally – shaping its decision-making on key issues by convening sortition-based deliberative assemblies to inform its policy stance. While Agora faces some tensions promoting deliberative ideals within the constraints of a dominantly electoral system, analysis suggests that this approach has led them to simultaneously reject and compete within the system, and it could also be another way forward for political leaders wanting to advance deliberative democracy within the constraints of the status quo.

Public demand for this change is also a driving force for a new relationship between politicians and citizens. Polling by Pew Research Center has found that, on average, 77% of respondents in France, Germany, the UK and the US think it is important for governments to create citizens’ assemblies where citizens debate issues and make recommendations about national laws.

According to a poll by OpinionWay and Sciences Po, 63% of people in France, Italy, Germany and the UK want the recommendations of citizens’ assemblies to be binding.

What can be done to help prepare a new generation of leaders for the next democratic paradigm?

Practising democracy

The notion of political leadership discussed here is rather different from traditional conceptions of it, which tend to emphasise an individual or a party’s ability to mobilise a ‘base’, the charisma needed to ‘win’, and a full programme of policy proposals. Finding common ground, stewarding a process which involves a wider portion of the population, and not claiming to have all the answers is the opposite of that. The broader question of how to encourage such a new conceptualisation to take hold has different layers to it, related to those currently in power, as well as future leaders in the next decades. For those currently leading, some of the simpler and most effective actions include peer-to-peer exchanges with those leading the most innovative efforts, as well as ‘study trips’ to witness and observe citizens’ assemblies in action. Political parties could also adopt the democratic practices of decision-making by sortition and deliberation internally, to familiarise themselves with these concepts in practice, and incorporate them into their process for platform and policy agenda creation.

To reach future generations, there is often talk of ‘civic education’. The practice of democracy offers the most promise, however. Replacing student council elections in schools with sortition processes can help spread the lived experience of deliberative democracy from an early age, as well as teaching about the historical and contemporary examples of assemblies with members selected by lot.

Finally, I think there is a virtuous cycle that emerges from institutionalisation itself, which helps create the conditions for new forms of leadership. Citizens’ assembly members gain agency through the process. Some go on to assume other forms of leadership in their communities, either through running for office, getting engaged in politics, starting new civil society associations, or volunteering. One of the best ways to inspire new political leadership will be through the spreading of institutionalised and empowered assemblies at all levels of governance. ■

Artwork by **Franz Lang** for the RSA. Franz is an artist and illustrator whose work has appeared in numerous publications, both in the UK and internationally

FAKING IT

Navigating the new era of generative AI may be the most critical challenge to democracy yet

By Nina Schick

We are on the cusp of a new stage in human evolution which will have a profound effect on society and democracy. I call it the ‘era of generative AI’, an epoch in which our relationship with machines will change the very framework of society. Navigating this period of immense change, with both the opportunities and risks that it engenders, will be one of the biggest challenges for both democracy and society in this century.

For the past decade, I have been researching how the development of a new type of AI, so-called ‘generative AI’, will impact humanity. The clue as to why this type of AI is so extraordinary is in its name: an emerging field of machine learning that allows machines to ‘generate’ or create new data or things that did not exist before.

The medium of this new data is any digital format. AI can create everything from synthetic audio to images, text and video. In its application, generative AI can be conceived of as a turbo engine for all information and knowledge. AI will increasingly be used not only to create all digital content, but as an automation layer to drive forward the production of all human intelligent and creative activity.

Picture a creative partner capable of writing riveting stories, composing enchanting music or designing breathtaking visual art. Now imagine this partner as an AI model – a tool that learns from the vast repository of digitised human knowledge, constantly refining its abilities in

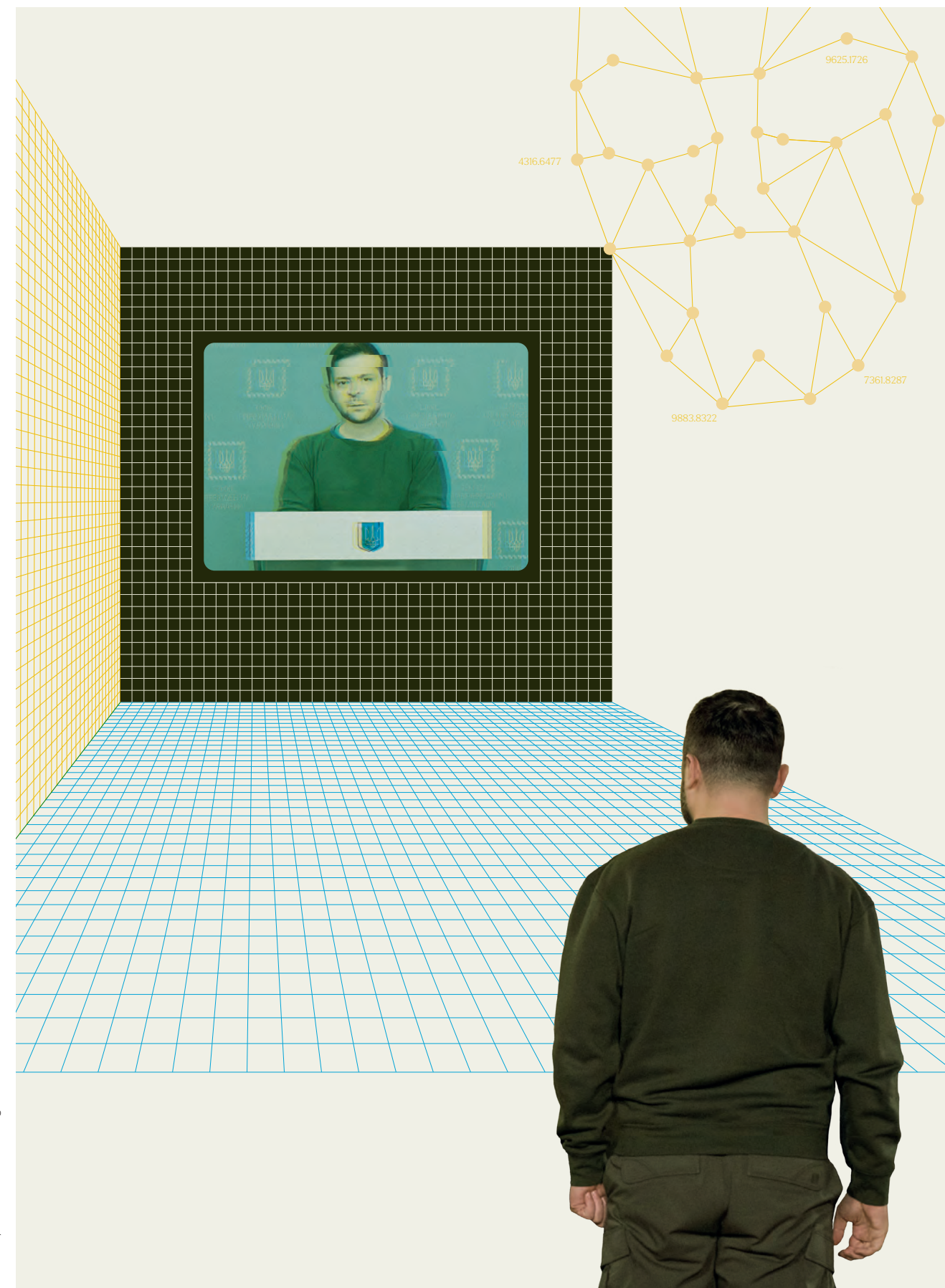
order to bring our most ambitious dreams to life.

This is generative AI: a digital virtuoso that captures the nuances of human intelligence and applies this to create something new and awe-inspiring – or new and terrifying. Through tapping into the power of deep learning techniques and neural networks, generative AI transcends traditional programming, effectively enabling machines to think, learn and adapt like never before.

This AI revolution is already becoming a fundamental feature of the digital ecosystem, seamlessly deployed into the physical and digital infrastructure of the internet, social media and smartphones. But while generative AI has been in the realm of the possible for less than a decade, it was only last November that it hit the mainstream. The release of ChatGPT – a large ‘language model’ (an AI system that can interpret and generate text) application – was an inflection point.

ChatGPT is now the most popular application of all time. It hit 100 million users within two months and currently averages over 100 million users per month. Almost everyone has a ChatGPT story, from the students using it to write their essays to the doctor using it to summarise patient notes. While there is huge excitement around generative AI, it is simultaneously raising critical concerns around information integrity and brings into question our collective capacity to adapt to the pace of change. ▶

Nina Schick is an author, entrepreneur and advisor specialising in generative AI. Previously, Nina worked advising leaders on geopolitical crises including Brexit, the Russia-Ukraine war and state-sponsored disinformation



Artwork by Wardour / Bloomberg / Contributor

From deepfakes to generative AI

While ‘generative AI’ was only really coined as a term in 2022, my deep dive into this world started in 2017 when I was advising global leaders, including former NATO secretary-general Anders Fogh Rasmussen and (then former vice-president) Joe Biden. The digital ecosystem that we have built over the past 30 years (underpinned by the internet, social media and smartphones) has become an essential ecosystem for business, communication, geopolitics and daily life. While the utopian dream of the Information Age has delivered, its darker underbelly was becoming increasingly evident, and I had spent the better half of a decade examining how the information ecosystem was being weaponised.

This ecosystem has empowered bad actors to engage in crime and political operations far more effectively and with impunity. Cybercrime, for example, is predicted to cost the world \$8tn (£6tn) in 2023. If it were measured as a country, cybercrime would be the world’s third-largest economy after the US and China.

But it is not only malicious actors that cause harm in this ecosystem. The sheer volume of

information we are dealing with, and our inability to interpret it, also has a dangerous effect. This is a phenomenon known as ‘censorship through noise’; it occurs when there is so much ‘stuff’ that we cannot distinguish or determine which messages we should be listening to.

All this was on my mind when I encountered AI-generated content for the first time in 2017. As the possibility of using AI to create novel data became increasingly viable, enthusiasts started to use this technology to create ‘deepfakes’. A deepfake has come to mean an AI-generated piece of content that simulates someone saying or doing something they never did. Although fake, it looks and sounds authentic.

The ability for AI to clone people’s identity – but more importantly, to generate synthetic content across all forms of digital medium (video, audio, text, images) – is a revolutionary development. This is not merely about AI being used to make fake content – the implications are far more profound. In this new paradigm, AI will be used to power the production of all information.

Information integrity and existential risk

In my 2020 book, *Deepfakes: The Coming Infocalypse*, I argued that the advent of AI-generated content would pose serious and existential risks, not only to individuals and businesses, but to democracy itself. Indeed, in the three years since my book was published, we have begun to encounter swathes of AI-generated content ‘in the wild’.

One year ago, at the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a deepfake video of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, urging his army to surrender, emerged on social media. If this message had been released at a vitally important moment of the Ukrainian resistance, it could have been devastating. While the video was quickly debunked, this example of weaponised synthetic content is a harbinger of things to come.

Deepfake identity scams – such as one in which crypto-scammers impersonated Tesla CEO Elon Musk – made more than \$1.7m (£1.4m) in six months in 2021, according to the US Federal Trade Commission. Meanwhile, a new type of fraud (dubbed ‘phantom fraud’), in which scammers use deepfake identities to accrue debt and launder money, has already resulted in losses of roughly \$3.4bn (£2.7bn).

Cumulatively, the proliferation of AI-generated content has a profound effect on digital trust. We were already struggling with the health of our

information ecosystem before AI came into the equation. But what does it mean for democracy, and society, if everything we consume online – the main diet feeding our brains – can be generated by artificial intelligence? How will we know what to trust? How will we differentiate between authentic and synthetic content?

Safeguarding the integrity of the information ecosystem is a fundamental priority not only for democracy, but for society as a whole. Not only can everything be ‘faked’ by AI, but the fact that AI can now ‘synthesise’ any digital content also means that authentic content (for example, a video documenting a human rights abuse or a politician accepting a bribe) can be decried as ‘synthetic’ or ‘AI-generated’ – a phenomenon known as ‘the liar’s dividend’.

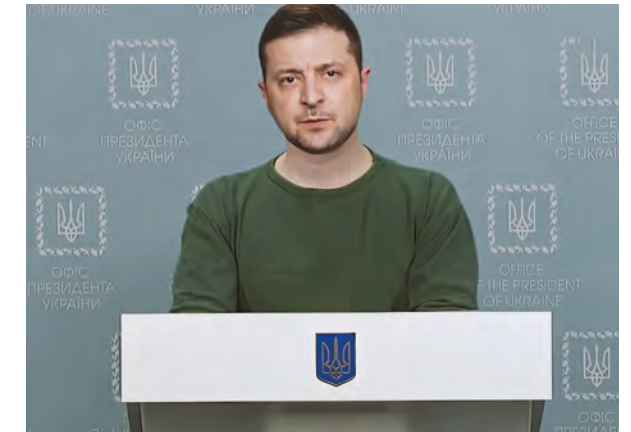
The core risk to democracy is a future in which AI is used as an engine to power all information and knowledge – consequently degrading trust in the medium of digital information itself.

But democracy (and society) cannot function if we cannot find a medium of information and communication that we can all agree to trust. It is therefore vital that we get serious about information integrity as AI becomes a core part of our information ecosystem.

Solutions: authentication of information

There are both technical and ‘societal’ ways in which to do this. One of the most promising approaches, in my view, is content authentication. Rather than trying to ‘detect’ everything that is made by AI (which will be futile if AI drives all information creation in the future, anyway), we embed the architecture of ‘authentication’ into the framework of the internet itself. This should be created with a cryptographic marker so its origin and mode of creation (whether it was made by AI or not) can always be verified. This kind of cryptography is embedded in the ‘DNA’ of the content, so it is not just a watermark – it is baked in and cannot be removed or faked.

But simply ‘signing’ content in this way is not enough. We also must adopt an open standard to allow that ‘DNA’ or mark of authentication to be seen whenever we engage with content across the internet – whether via email, YouTube or social media. This open standard for media authentication is already being developed by the Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity (C2PA), a non-profit organisation that counts the BBC, Microsoft, Adobe and Intel among its members.



Above: A still taken from a deepfake video circulated in March 2022 that appeared to show Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky urging the surrender of his forces

Ultimately, this approach is about radical transparency in information. Rather than adjudicating the truth (a fool’s errand), it is about allowing everyone to make their own trust decisions based on context. Just as I want to see a label that tells me what goes into the food I eat, society needs to have the digital infrastructure in place that allows individuals to determine how to judge or trust the online information that fuels almost every single decision we make.

Building societal resilience

But the solutions cannot be solved by technology alone. We can build the tools for signing content, and the open standard to verify information across the internet, but the bigger challenge is understanding that we stand on the precipice of a very different world – one in which exponential technologies are going to change the very framework of society.

This means that old ways of thinking need to be updated. Our analogue systems are no longer fit for purpose. We must reconceptualise what it means to be citizens of a vibrant democracy, and understanding is the first step. Ultimately, this is not a story about technology – this is a story about humanity.

While the recent advances in AI have kicked off much discussion about the advent of ‘artificial general intelligence’ (AGI, ie the point at which machines take over as they become smarter than humans) we are not there – yet. We still have the agency to decide how AI is integrated into our society, and that is our responsibility. As a democracy, this challenge is one of the most important of our time – we must not squander our chance to get it right. ■

Primary Pioneers

Primary Pioneers, a pilot social innovation programme for primary school pupils created by Social Innovation for All (SI4A), received a Catalyst Seed Grant of £2,000 in January 2023. This new programme has been designed to help upper primary pupils build transferable skills, agency and citizenship; it uses design thinking to engage young people in identifying and developing solutions to issues they care about within their local communities.

According to Katherine Crisp, Founder and Director of SI4A, Primary Pioneers will initially focus on 150–200 Year 6 pupils preparing to transition to secondary school, working with three primary schools in Brighton and surrounding areas to co-create curriculum content and a pilot programme that will run between May and July 2023. The aim is to build a replicable model that either focuses on local social issues, or else has a specific thematic focus, such as climate change.

Primary Pioneers builds transferable skills while creating positive social impact and inspiring the next generation of social innovators. Katherine said: “SI4A is on a mission to unleash the creative potential of children and young people to address social challenges. We would love to hear from Fellows working in education, social innovation or climate education in Brighton & Hove and the surrounding area.”

■ To learn more, visit www.si4a.net

SHOOT FOR THE MOON

The potential of the creative industries to transform the future of a nation

By Tom Kenyon

The power of the UK's creative industries has, for too long, been undersold and over-centralised. The creative industries are an engine of growth, a driver of innovation and a catalyst for change. And they sit at the nexus of the pillars of arts, manufactures and commerce, on which the RSA was built.

Over the last six months, the RSA has worked closely with Newcastle University and the incumbent team at the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC) to build a five-year partnership funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The RSA will work with the PEC to share their world-class research and develop new policy, innovation and research projects to further deliver the transformational potential of the creative industries.

I say transformational potential without equivocation. There is a common misconception that the creative industries are a societal luxury; that because film and fashion and music and games and communications and publishing and culture are there to make life more pleasurable, their work is fundamentally not serious.

This is demonstrably false.

employer made up of 2.3m filled jobs as of 2021, an increase of 11.1% since 2019 and around 7% of the UK's total jobs. By some estimates, the creative industries have the potential to more than double in size, reaching a gross value added of £250–300bn by 2030 and employing around 4.3 million people – far outstripping the average growth of the rest of the economy.

This growth is not, however, evenly distributed. London and the South East of England together form a creative industries 'supercluster' which strongly outperforms the rest of the country. Between 2010 and 2019, the London creative economy grew by 61%, while, over the same period, the Welsh creative economy grew by only 3%. The creative industries in the North of England grew by 30% over the same period.

Innovation and change

Creative industries-led innovation shapes our physical and digital lives, from the way we interact and communicate, to the clothes we wear to the buildings we live and work in.

It is partly, but not solely, through this level of innovation that the creative industries power change. The RSA has been looking at the role of arts and the creative industries in regenerating local economies. Thriving creative industries can change our experience of places for the better.

Growth

The creative industries contributed £109bn to the UK economy in 2021. The sector is a key

Tom Kenyon is Head of Enterprise Design at the RSA



The connection between wellbeing and access to arts and culture is well documented. Creative industries also have a positive spillover effect on local economies, with supply chain spending in industries like hospitality and catering, new ideas and practices spreading to different sectors, attracting new visitors and skilled workers to that place.

We must also not forget the power of storytelling, connection and play to effect change. Movements are built on stories, storytellers and visions of a positive future.

Creative clusters

In its spring 2023 budget, the UK government recognised the creative industries as a sector of strategic importance; supporting creative clusters is also an issue recognised in the investment zone policy prospectus. This is a moment to supercharge support for the creative industries, culture and arts across the whole of the UK, not just the South East. For inspiration, we can look to the US, where, over the last 15 years, the state of Georgia has built a creative cluster around prestige TV shows such as *The Walking Dead* and combined a strong skills base and major incentives to build a regional film industry that attracted a new studio from Marvel and now rivals Hollywood.

“This is a moment to supercharge support for the creative industries, culture and arts across the whole of the UK”

The RSA is in a unique position to support the growth of creative clusters in three ways:

1. Convene local policy and industry leaders to *influence policy and practice*.
2. Work in close partnership with universities and other research organisations to build world-class data and evidence to show how to *grow economic and social impact through creative industries*.
3. Use the innovation capabilities of the RSA and our Fellowship to *pilot evidence-informed policy innovations* in place and evaluate impact.

In the short term, we are working with regional mayors, sector leads and our partners at Newcastle University to convene a Northern Creative Corridor project. This alliance has the potential to influence creative industries policy and finance at a national scale. We also see opportunities to support creative skills strategies that would benefit the whole region and to explore new models of finance for innovation and social impact through the creative industries. ■

Artwork by **Harry Haysom** for the RSA. Harry is a designer and illustrator based in London, UK



BISH BASH BOSH

The UK's creative sector is booming with ideas and opportunity – so why aren't more of us paying attention?

Sir Peter Bazalgette

Beyoncé, the multi-million-selling international music star, is regularly to be found near Pontefract in West Yorkshire. The reason? This is where a world-leading live event production company puts together the rig and digital design for her tours of the world's mega-stadia and music venues. This is just one example of the ways in which the UK's creative industries, which encompass advertising, marketing, design, fashion, video games, performing arts and more, have demonstrated great potential for wealth and job creation.

Here in the UK, the creative industries contribute around 6% of our total economy, employ 2.3 million people and export more than £50bn of goods and services each year. But there's a danger that this success – driven by a fusion of creativity and technology we call 'createch' – may stall.

This was the subject of my lecture at the RSA in April this year, attended by Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal, who has served as the Society's president since 2011.

When I say bish bash bosh, I'm trying to inject a sense of urgency into this great opportunity for economic and cultural growth. But in the creative industries we have a branding challenge: we're known for our entertainment but not properly recognised as the research and development-led sector we are becoming. We should be as

clearly labelled as life sciences, automotive and aerospace are in this respect. And, as it happens, we're worth rather more than those three sectors put together.

Our challenge is to find and champion local examples of successful collaborations between science, technology, art and design. The multimedia masters in Pontefract are one great case study, but there are many, many other creative industry triumphs where differing talents congregate and where alliances with local education and local authorities prosper: music in Manchester and Sheffield, video games in Dundee and Leamington Spa, TV and film in Cardiff and Bristol, fashion in Leeds and London, and so on.

Of great concern is the rapid decline in the number of pupils taking design and technology at school (70% over a decade, apparently). We must correct the historic failure to define the many career pathways into the creative industries, otherwise the next generation of talent will not see their future in our sector.

For some time, employers have venerated science, technology, engineering and maths qualifications – STEM. In the creative industries we like to add the A for arts to make it really dynamic. That spells STEAM, by the way.

And this wouldn't be the first time STEAM has propelled an industrial revolution, would it? ■

Image from RSA



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ADAPTATION NATION

A new breed of changemaker is finding ways to strengthen civic fabric and solidarity

By Alexa Clay

A climate of political polarisation, a hunger for inclusion, a growing distrust of institutions, a weakened civil society and the rise of authoritarianism have all created a ripe backdrop for a new species of changemaker – the ‘democracy entrepreneur’. Across the globe, innovators are working to recentre democratic cultures in everyday life. At the RSA, we support this growing democracy movement through our global Fellowship network and by amplifying the work of our partners around the world.

Of By For is an organisation working to shift power from elections to democratic lotteries. At the height of the pandemic, when discussion around Covid-19 protocols were heavily politicised, Co-directors Adam Cronkright and George Zisiadis brought citizens in the US state of Michigan together through a lottery process to find common ground. The result was a transformational journey (documented in film) that attested to the healing power of deliberative approaches by which citizens grew empathy for one another, came to understand their own biases and detached from political ideology, working collaboratively to put forward recommendations on a policy issue that was previously divisive.

At a time when politicians and the media seem intent on manufacturing division, democracy entrepreneurs are finding ways to strengthen civic fabric and solidarity. Some of these interventions focus on the use of citizen assemblies, creating localised power and decision-making. Others concentrate on the field of economic democracy, including explorations of public ownership,

community wealth-building and stakeholder capitalism, all of which, in the words of Democracy Collaborative’s Sarah McKinley, emphasise a “pre-distributed way of building fairer economies rather than a re-distributed approach”.

Ethiopian American changemaker Yordanos Eyeol is building a pro-democracy movement through her Cambridge, Massachusetts-based organisation, Keseb, which is developing a global fellowship network that fosters learning, collaboration and innovation among democracy activists and civil society organisations. Keseb’s focus will initially be on the US, Brazil, South Africa and India, which share challenges of being multi-ethnic societies.

“Contrary to social entrepreneurs, who can focus in on a particular service or product,” says Yordanos, “democracy entrepreneurs are dealing with rapidly evolving political landscapes that require more adaptive approaches. They share a common set of challenges.” Her mission includes supporting these innovators to learn from one another and socialise this agenda with funders.

As the RSA embarks on a commitment to increased global impact, we are working to support international communities of practice that highlight deliberation and participation in diverse local geographies. At the RSA US, our Deliberation Gateway Network, run by Chris Forman, FRSA, is working to make deliberative tools and practice more mainstream and accessible for individuals to apply these methods in their own communities. ■

Image from Alejandro Garay. Unsplash

Alexa Clay is the Director of RSA US

THROUGH THE GRAPEVINE

How one organisation is ‘going deep’ on a journey to empower communities in Coventry and Warwickshire

by Mel Smith

Our vision at Grapevine is local citizens with the skills and confidence to act on what they care about, connecting through their shared humanity, taking power into their own hands and regenerating their communities.

Grapevine exists to help the people and communities of Coventry and Warwickshire to thrive – because too many struggle on the edge of coping. We want local people and communities to be stronger, to be able to take opportunities, tackle their challenges and shape their lives. This happens when people have the power to take action and the capacity and capability to work together for change.

If we accept that it will take all of us to address these challenges, then we need to go deep together. This involves putting relationships at the heart of what we do, strengthening the leadership of local people and going deeper into communities regularly excluded from having a democratic voice. Relationships matter to us at Grapevine. From working with the individual to communities and through to the boardroom, it all starts with being more human and working towards a world that prioritises relationships.

Connecting for Good Cov, a movement to end isolation and marginalisation initiated by Grapevine and local citizens, has sparked over 20 initiatives tackling isolation and marginalisation to date. It is led by hundreds of Coventry people in a way that is emphatically ‘bottom-up’.

One of these initiatives is Creative Kindness, a group that facilitates crafting sessions to promote positive wellbeing. Chris Reid, one

of the core team, says the group’s membership began to thrive following a move to Coventry’s Central Library in May 2019 and continues to grow, starting in another five locations since then. “Grapevine’s Community Organisers have been coaching and supporting us from day one,” says Chris. “They helped us to build a core team and supported us to develop connections with others to strengthen our mission.”

We are also growing leadership to tackle the systemic causes of the inequalities communities face by holding those in power to account. Our Community Organisers are working with Coventry Youth Activists (CYA), a group of young disabled people calling for social media platforms to change the way they handle online disability hate. The group recently hosted a meeting with Meta’s Head of UK content regulation policy and the Patagonia EU team to further build their allyship; significantly, these sessions started with time carved out for building relationships and agendas that created equal power.

To organise well we have to be in relationship with one another, we have to understand what Community Organising is and how it helps to unlock collective power and the capacity for transformation. We have to learn about the structural causes of the things that need to change and we have to work together to influence established power structures to secure wins. ■

■ To learn more about Grapevine, contact msmith@grapevinecovandwarks.org



Above: Chris Reid from Creative Kindness Coventry, at Connecting For Good Walk and Talk through Coventry city centre in August 2019

Mel Smith is Deputy CEO at Grapevine Coventry and Warwickshire. She is also part of the Relationships Collective, a group of nine individuals who are working together to identify areas for collective, practical action to support and advocate for relationship-centred work

Image from John Whitmore

F.P.T.P.
First Past The Post



First past what post?

by Naomi Smith

A little bit of ignominious history was made at Towcester Racecourse in March 2011, when no horses finished the 4.25 steeplechase.

Of the four entries, two fell at the sixth fence and two came to grief at the final hurdle, leaving astonished punters with exactly no gee-gees to cheer over the finishing line.

Because nobody reached the finishing post, the race was declared void and – here’s a thing – everybody got their money back from the bookies.

In the world of horses, first past the post (FPTP) means just that. Getting to within a furlong of the finish and then expiring counts for nowt, even if you were the last gelding standing.

Politics, of course, purloined FPTP from the racing fraternity and applied it to the outdated electoral system which still blights general elections in Britain, among other places.

The arguments against FPTP are many. It imposes minority rule (in 2019, the Conservatives won 56% of seats with only 43.6% of the vote) and squeezes out smaller parties (the Liberal Democrats, Greens and Brexit party gained 16% of votes combined but only 2% of seats).

And votes are not equal. Because of the way voter groups are concentrated, in 2019 the SNP and Sinn Fein won one seat for every 26,000 votes they attracted. The Conservatives won one seat for every 38,000 votes they received, but Labour needed 51,000 for one seat and the Greens needed 866,000.

FPTP is also a misnomer: there is no post to pass. A party might gain power with 35% of the

vote (2005) or 48% (1966). What you’ll struggle to find is a party that gains power with 50% or more of the vote (excluding coalition deals).

If this makes you feel uneasy, you are not alone. Political parties know FPTP is not fit for purpose and, tellingly, none of them uses it for their own leadership contests.

As an alternative, there are various forms of proportional representation and, while it’s hard to argue that any is perfect, it’s harder still to argue that they are inferior to FPTP. They all seek to allocate votes fairly and to ensure everybody’s vote counts – something that FPTP fails to achieve.

FPTP disenfranchises voters, and it does so extremely effectively. Major parties can ignore safe seats, with resources focused on key marginals, making it even more likely that smaller parties will be squeezed out in these areas.

The public was asked to vote on replacing FPTP with an alternative vote system (which itself is not proportionate) back in May 2011. Almost 68% rejected it. But public opinion has shifted markedly in recent years, possibly because of frustration with the present system.

In the end, FPTP will go, because upcoming generations will view the disenfranchisement it imposes as disparagingly as previous generations viewed the disenfranchisement of working men and women, and history will likely view the reformers kindly.

As for those who have the opportunity but lack the courage to abandon FPTP – if they are remembered, it will be for flogging a dead horse. ■

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