Full Democracy

by

Brian Beedham

(Abridged)

It means government by the people, and we are the people

This survey argues that the next big change in human affairs will probably not be a matter of economics, or electronics, or military science; it will be a change in the supposedly humdrum world of politics. The coming century could see, at last, the full flowering of the idea of democracy. The democratic system of politics, which first took widespread root in the 19th century, and then in the 20th century beat off the attacks of both fascism and communism, may in the 21st century realize that it has so far been living, for understandable reasons, in a state of arrested development, but that those reasons no longer apply; and so democracy can set about completing its growth.

The places that now consider themselves to be democracies are with a handful of exceptions run by the process generally known as "representative" democracy. That qualifying adjective should make you sit up and think.

The starting-point of modern democracy is the belief that every sane adult is entitled to an equal say in the conduct of public affairs. Some people are richer than others, some are more intelligent, and nobody's interests are quite the same as anybody else’s; but all are entitled to an equal voice in deciding how they should be governed. There is therefore something odd in the fact that in most democracies this voice is heard only once every few years, in elections in which voters choose a president or send their representatives to an elected parliament; and that between those elections, for periods of anything up to seven years, it is the presidents and parliamentarians who do all the deciding, while the rest of the democracy is expected to stand more or less quietly on one side, either nodding its head in irrelevant approval or growling in frustrated disagreement. This is part-time democracy.

There exists in a few places a different way of doing it, called direct democracy. In this straightforward version, the elected representatives are not left to their own devices in the periods between elections. The rest of the people can at any time call them to order, by canceling some decision of the representatives with which most of the people do not agree or, sometimes, by insisting that the representatives do something they had no wish to do, or perhaps had never even thought about. The machinery by which this is done is the referendum**,** a vote of the whole people. If democracy means rule by the people, democracy by referendum is a great deal closer to the original idea than the every few years voting which is all that most countries have.

The test is: Who gives the order?

It has to be the right kind of referendum, of course. A referendum organized by the government, posing a question of the government’s choice in the words the government finds most convenient, is seldom much help to democracy. Not many referendums are quite as blatant as the Chilean one of 1978 ("in the face of international aggression ... I support President Pinochet in his defense of the dignity of Chile."). But General de Gaulle in the early 1960s plainly saw his *de haut en bas* sort of referendums as one means of making sure, as he put it, that "the entire indivisible authority of the state is confided to the president," meaning himself. Napoleon liked the technique, too. Even more modest politicians are unlikely to resist the temptation to put a spin on their referendums' wording: 'Your government, having after careful thought decided that X is the right thing to do, asks you to agree."

No, the proper referendum for democracy-strengthening purposes is the one, which happens whether the government wants it or not. This can be arranged by constitutional requirement, an instruction in the constitution saying that certain kinds of change in the law must be submitted to a vote of the whole people. Better, because this way is more flexible, an agreed number of voters can insist, by putting their signatures on a

petition, that a law proposed by parliament must be -submitted to the people for their approval or rejection. Best of all, an agreed number of signatures can ensure that a brand-new idea for a law is put to the voters whatever the president or the parliament thinks about it.

Change calls for change

These are the channels through which power previously dammed up by the politicians can be made to flow into the hands of ordinary people. The politicians, naturally, present various arguments against doing anything of the sort. Some of their arguments do not stand up to a moment's examination. Others are more serious, and one in particular raises a genuine problem for direct democracy if a current weakness in the economies of Europe and America becomes a permanent fixture.

On the other hand, the defenders of the old-fashioned form of democracy have to face the fact that the world has changed radically since the time when it might have seemed plausible to think the voters' wishes needed to be filtered through the finer intelligence of those “representatives.” The changes that have taken place since then have removed many of the differences between ordinary people and their representatives. They have also helped the people to discover that the representatives are not especially competent. As a result, what worked reasonably well in the 19th century will not work in the 21st century. Our children may find direct democracy more efficient, as well as more democratic, than the representative sort.

This is a far bigger change than any alteration in the way in which the representatives get elected--proportional representation rather than the first past-the-post system, alternative voting, and so on. These are just variations in the method by which power is delegated. Direct democracy keeps it undelegated. First, then, a picture of how direct democracy actually works, a matter about which most people have only the haziest idea.

It is still, admittedly, a pretty scattered phenomenon. Slightly less than half the states in the United States use it, some with fairly spectacular results, though it so far has no place in American politics at the federal level. Australia has held almost 50 nationwide referendums, and its component states almost as many again (one in every six of which was about bar-closing times). Italy has recently become a serious exponent of direct democracy, and its referendums in 1991 and 1993 played a large part in breaking up the corrupt old Italian party system. The new light has flickered occasionally in Denmark, New Zealand, Ireland and a few other countries. But the best country to look at is Switzerland, which virtually invented direct democracy, and uses it at every level of politics.

So long as it’s clear who’s in charge

The first lesson from Switzerland is that direct democracy is hard work. The second is that, though it makes politicians less important than they like to be, it does not remove the need for an intelligent parliament; the system works most efficiently when politicians stop assuming they know best, but do their proper job with modest zeal.

This proper job, as with any parliament, is to sit down, discuss the problems of the day, and propose solutions for them. The difference in a direct democracy is that the parliament's solutions are not necessarily the last word in the matter until the next general election, which may be years away. In Switzerland, 50,000 signatures on a petition, a bit over 1% of the current total of qualified voters, are enough to haul any new countrywide law before a vote of the whole people. Twice that number of signatures will put a brand-new idea for a law to the people's decision, even if parliament wants nothing to do with it. Because of a Swiss quirk, new federal laws coming from outside parliament have to take the form of amendments to the constitution, with the result that Switzerland’s constitution has come to look like an over-stuffed cupboard; but there is no reason why the same process could not put such new laws on the ordinary statute-book, as happens in, many American states and in most of Switzerland's own cantons.

From the ridiculous to the sublime

In all, almost 450 nationwide questions have gone to a vote of the whole Swiss people since the current system got going 130 years ago-over half the world's all-time tally of national referendums, and overwhelmingly most of the genuine non-Napoleonic, sort. At three and a half a year, that may not sound all

that much. But the pace has been accelerating lately; and, when you add the votes in which the Swiss decide what to do in their cantons and communities, it means that three or four times a year they are invited to read in the meticulously impartial documents sent to them through the post, or watch on television, or pull off the Internet, the arguments for and against up to a dozen assorted issues, and give their decisions. That is hard work.

Those decisions, at the all-Swiss levels, range from the tiny to the huge. Last March the country's voters solemnly decided to let the French-speaking Catholics of the hamlet of Vellerat (population 71) leave the mainly Protestant and German-speaking canton of Bern to join the French-Catholic canton of Jura, which had itself for the same reason been allowed to break away from Bern in 1978. In September 1993 the Swiss rather belatedly gave themselves a day off work every August 1st, the anniversary of Switzerland's birth a mere 705 years ago.

Such things bring a condescending smile to the foreigner's face. But, a few months before the holiday vote, a band of signature-collectors who wanted to stop the Swiss air force buying any new fighter aircraft for the rest of the century, and to reduce the number of bases the army is allowed to use, had got within a few percentage points of winning their case. And six months before that the voters, against the advice of most of their leaders, had momentously decided not to join the European Economic Area, lest even this small step to Euro-cohesion should eventually enmesh them in a European political union most of them do not want.

It should not be deduced from that act of defiance, however, that direct democracy spells chaos for Switzerland in return for the parliament's acceptance that the people are the boss, the people are quite often willing to heed the parliament's views.

Only a handful of the measures that could under Swiss rules have been summoned to a referendum in the past 130 years actually have been summoned. Of the laws written by parliament, which have been called before the people's judgment, half have then been given the people's okay. The voters have turned down nine-tenths of the new legislation proposed by the signature-collecting process. When parliament puts up a counter-proposal, it is accepted two times out of three. If anything, people and parliament get on better these days than they used to; only about a quarter of the acts of parliament put to the referendum since 1960 have been rejected, compared with well over a half 100 years ago.

Still, a certain weariness has crept into the proceedings lately. The turnout for referendums, once pretty regularly 50-60% or more, went into a decline in the 1950s. Despite a few moments of big-issue excitement, it has been floating around the 40% mark for most of the 1980s and 1990s. The people of Switzerland have lost some of their enthusiasm for voting, compared with people in most of the big representative democracies.

It does you good in moderation

This almost certainly does not mean that the Swiss no longer think direct democracy a good idea. The much likelier explanation is that, as the population has grown (and since women won the vote in 1971), the number of signatures needed to summon a referendum has become a much smaller proportion of the total number of voters than it used to be. This means not only that there is a lot more voting to do--ten nationwide votes a year on average in the 1990s, compared with three in the 1920s and 1930s--but also that a fair number of referendums are the work of small and excited groups of enthusiasts. This turns people off, and some of them stop voting. The politicians thereupon explain that direct democracy is dying, so they themselves should be put back in charge.

This can be remedied when the Swiss overhaul their voting system, as they plan to do in the next few years, especially if they look at what some of their more adventurous cantons are already doing. If the number of signatures' needed to call a referendum is raised to something nearer its old share of the electorate, there will be fewer referendums. If the procedure for collecting signatures is made a bit sterner (some Swiss supermarkets will let you do it at the check-out counter), maybe more of the referendums that do take place

will be seriously thought though. The voting turn out will then presumably go up again; the fear that referendums are becoming the voice of excited minorities will subside; and the superior look on the politicians' faces will duly disappear.

There is still a solid basis for partnership between the politicians of Switzerland and the people with their special power. The voters are content to let the politicians do most of the routine work of politics, and to listen to their advice on many complicated issues. The politicians, for their part, have learned that ordinary people are often surprisingly (to politicians) shrewd in their decisions.

In the 1970s the voters refused to be frightened by anti-immigrant propaganda into sending home most of the foreigners working in Switzerland (and this December they declined to tighten the rules against asylum-seekers). In the 1980s and 1990s, they were persuaded to dig into their pockets to start paying value-added tax. And not long ago there was a splendid moment after most of the political class had shaken a furious fist at the voters' refusal to accept an anti-urban-sprawl planning law. The politicians then discovered that just as much sprawl could be prevented, more cheaply, by a different scheme. Politicians and people may occasionally snarl at each other but they have learned how to work together. The Swiss will go on doing democracy their direct way.

The arguments that won't wash

Ah yes, the objectors say at once: perhaps the Swiss can do these things but that does not mean anybody else can. The Swiss, you see, have a unique gift for direct democracy. To which the answer is: come off it. There is nothing special about the Swiss. They are a perfectly ordinary mixture of west-central European peoples (and the fact that they are a mixture makes it harder, not easier, for them to run their country in this way). They too yawn at the blearier aspects of politics; the turnout goes down with a bump when there is nothing of particular interest on the referendum. list. They too get sudden bees in the bonnet; it was the Swiss, in 1989, who asked themselves whether they should abolish their army, and found 35.6% of themselves saying yes. Here are no models of zealously dutiful civic rectitude.

If the Swiss can manage this richer form of democracy, it is not because they have always had it. There were some fine early examples of pastoral democracy high up in the Alps in the later Middle Ages. But other parts of the world have had similar things--the town meetings of New England, for instance--and it was not until the 1860s that a countrywide Swiss system of direct democracy got itself organized. Nor is the explanation that the Swiss are an especially sophisticated lot. They are now the second-richest people in Europe, and give themselves a good education; but for the first 60 or 70 years of their democratic experiment--its most vigorous period, many would say--they were largely rural, not very well-to-do, and as politically unpolished as any other people of the time.

Least of all should the Switzerland-is-special school be allowed to get away with the argument that Switzerland can do it because "it is such a small country, where they all know each other." That is half-true of the smallest cantons and communities, but nobody who knows the place would say it was true of Switzerland as a whole in a country with nearly 6m citizens and four different languages, the ordinary voter in Zurich knows no more about the political thought-process of the ordinary voter in Geneva or Lugano than the New Yorker does about the San Franciscan's, the Londoner about the Glaswegian's. The German-speaking and French-speaking parts of the country, in particular, are quite often at angry odds with each other: the 1992 vote about membership of the European Economic Area is only one recent example. The Swiss are not a natural unity, born to chat things over easily on referendum day. Do not believe that the god of direct democracy has selected them as his chosen people.

Remember, politics is politics

The other attempts to demolish the idea of direct democracy are, with one exception, no more convincing than the notion that only the Swiss can do it. Some people argue, for instance, that letting all the voters share in the decision-making process is bound to be inefficient, because it defies the division-of-labor principle.

In the world of economics, these people explain, it would never be suggested that everybody should grow his own food, make his own shoes and construct his own laptop computer. The sensible way to organize things is to let people specialize, so that those who do it best produce each thing; the consumer then has a far wider range of goods to choose from, much more cheaply. So, in the world of politics, if the specialists of the political class are allowed to get on with the complex business of decision-making, the ordinary chap will end up much better off.

To this the reply is: sorry, but politics is different from economics. The world of politics is not divided between consumers and producers (unless you agree with people like Lenin and Stalin, who thought they knew exactly what needed to be done to create a happy world, and so decreed that their Politburo should be the sole producer of political decisions). In democratic politics, everyone is a consumer, and by the same token everyone can join in the production process. There is no evidence that widening the production process to let ordinary people take part in decision-making in the years between parliamentary elections leads to a narrowing of the range of goods on offer, or increases their price. On the contrary: direct democracy seems to expand the choice, most of the newly recruited producers are happy to do their work for free, and with luck the members of parliament will cost less.

A variation of this attempt to confuse politics with economics is an argument, also used by adversaries of direct democracy, which confuses politics with science. You would not entrust your health to the advice of your next-door neighbor, runs this argument, or ask the other passengers on the train taking you to work how to set about building a nuclear reactor. You go to a doctor or a physicist, somebody trained in the science of medicine or atomic energy. So in politics you should turn to somebody who understands the science of politics--namely, your elected representative.

But politics is not a science, either. Parts of it require some detailed knowledge of various subjects, not least economics, and this is one reason why it makes sense to keep parliaments in existence, places where people are paid to burrow into such details. But the heart of democratic politics is the process of finding out, which of the various possible solutions to a problem is the one most people think the best. The quickest and most efficient way of finding that out, surely, is to ask tile people directly, rather than leaving the choice to a handful of parliamentarians who may well discover at the next parliamentary election that most people think they got it wrong.

The claim that there is such a thing as a science of politics is deeply revealing. Those who make it are in fact claiming that the policies they think best are the ones that should be followed, even if most of the rest of the country disagrees, because the rest of the country is "scientifically" wrong. That is not unlike the sort of thing you hear from conservative mullahs in the Muslim world, who say that since politics is a branch of religion only the "scholars of Islam" are equipped to puzzle out God's political intentions. Such a claim is not just anti-direct-democracy; it is anti-democracy.

The distorting effect of money

There is a bit more substance, but only a bit, in the worry that money can shape the outcome of a referendum. When a question is put to a vote of the whole people, those whose interests are affected naturally want the vote to go their way, and are prepared to spend a lot of money on the signature-collecting and the propagandizing, which are designed to bring that about.

Studies in both Switzerland and those American states, which use direct democracy, suggest a pretty frequent link between the amount of money spent and the result of the referendum. The link is by no means always there. The Swiss took their decision about Europe even though most of the big money had been trying to persuade them to vote the other way. The voters of several American states have passed anti-gun legislation despite the gun lobby's opposition. Italy's voters helped to torpedo the country's old political system in 1991 and 1993 while the system's two main parties watched ashen faced. But the connection between money and votes seems persistent enough to justify concern.

There are two reasons, however, for thinking it does not decisively tilt the argument between direct and representative democracy. One is the fact that the voters can if they wish set limits on the amount of propaganda money spent at referendum time.

The Swiss have not done so, because the sums spent in Switzerland are (by American standards) still fairly small, and the Swiss do not think they have ever produced a result outrageous enough to require a remedy. The voters of California, on the other hand, in 1974 overruled the resistance of special-interest groups to pass Proposition 9, which set some firm spending limits. Proposition 9 was then squashed by the federal Supreme Court in the name of the constitutional right to freedom of speech. This November the voters of Montana had a shot at doing the same thing in a way that might escape the Supreme Court's Veto. In a direct democracy, the voters can set the rules under which referendums take place, so long as these rules respect the country's constitution which. in a direct democracy, the voters can themselves change.

The other reason for not letting the money issue decide the argument is that money-power almost certainly distorts the old sort of democracy more than it does the new sort. In a direct democracy, the lobbyists have to aim their money at the whole body of voters. Since most of the money is spent on public propaganda campaigns, it is hard for them to conceal what they are up to. In a representative democracy, however, the lobbyists' chief target is much smaller--just the few hundred members of the government and the legislature--and so it is much easier for them to keep what they are doing secret. They have at their disposal a whole armory of devices ranging from the quietly arranged free holiday in a sunny corner of the world "for information-gathering purposes" through cash-with-a-wink for saying the right things in parliament to straight bribery for getting your government to order the bribe-giver's make of airplane.

There have been too many recent examples of all those things all over the democratic world. This is why, when somebody says he is worried about the influence of money over referendums the correct retort is: "'At least you can't bribe the whole people."

Most of the other criticisms of direct democracy are, like this one, equally applicable to the rival version. Does a new referendum designed to solve one problem sometimes carelessly create a new problem? To be sure it does; and the same applies to many an act of parliament. Are some referendums obscurely worded? Yes, and so is some of the work of professional draftsmen; think of the Maastricht treaty. Can the man in the street be counted on to understand tricky economic issues? No, but neither, quite often, can the supposed experts; recall Britain's doomed plunge into Europe's exchange rate mechanism. None of these objections is fatal. There remains, however, one genuine cause for concern about the way direct democracy works.

The underclass test

The serious worry is whether deciding things by a vote of the whole people is the best way of looking after an unhappy minority of the people. The worry grows when one particular bunch of unhappy people looks like getting stuck indefinitely at the bottom of the pile. The advocates of direct democracy have to ask themselves whether their preferred form of government can cope, with the emergence of a permanent underclass.

Of course, unhappy minorities are a problem in any sort of democracy. Whether they are defined by the smallness of their income or the color of their skin, they tend to vote less frequently than other people do. In a representative democracy, they therefore elect less than their fair share of the members of parliament, and so their complaints have less chance of getting listened to.

But such people may fare even worse in a referendum-based system. Statistics from all over the world show that participation in referendums is almost always a bit lower than it is in candidate choosing elections. The lower the turnout, the worse the minorities perform. Studies in Switzerland and America make it pretty clear that, as turnout declines, the proportion of the vote cast by the poor and unschooled drops even further and the proportion cast by the better-off is better- educated grows still bigger. Referendums are by several percentage points a more middle-class way of doing things than parliamentary elections.

To this must be added the different ways in which the two kinds of democracy tackle the issues facing them. In a parliamentary system, each of the rival parties offers a package of proposals to the voters at election-time. The party that wants to do something to help an unhappy minority tucks its proposal for doing so inside the package. Voters who do not care for that particular scheme may nevertheless accept it if they like

the rest of the bundle. In a direct democracy, on the other hand, the proposal can be brought to a separate vote, all by itself. It requires no leap of the imagination to suspect that a minority-helping project, which puts up taxes, will find that sort of vote a bigger obstacle.

The need to vote unselfishly

The difference may not matter hugely when the unhappy minorities are fluid groups, changing their composition from decade to decade. This is what happens when a flourishing economy and an efficient education system are regularly converting large numbers of poor people's children into new members, of the middle class, and when racial tolerance is holding open the gates of the ghetto. The difference matters much more when the division between groups grows more rigid. That may be happening now in many parts of Europe and America, the bottom layer of society seems to be in danger of getting stuck at the bottom for ever.

These are the people who have not been bright enough or energetic enough or lucky enough to escape from the conditions into which they were born, and join the newly prosperous majority. The end-of-the-20th-century economy no longer provides them with the simple manual work their predecessors were generally able to scrape by on. The breakdown of marriage, and the disproportionately large increase within this group in the number of single-parent children, mean that most of these children are unlikely to grow up in a way that will help them to do any better. An unemployment rate of over l0%, the current figure in most of the European Union, reduces their chances still further. Here is the possibility of a permanent underclass. It is a grisly thought. if those trapped in the underclass have access to the chemistry of consciousness-changing, the instruments of violence and easy means of transport, it gets even grislier.

This is the challenge to supporters of government by referendum: they have to demonstrate that their system would not turn its back on the underclass. They can comfort themselves with the thought that legislation designed to prevent a social explosion is unlikely to come very frequently to a vote of the whole people. If Switzerland's experience is anything to go by, this is one of those complicated subjects that the voters are on the whole willing to leave to parliament. They do not often summon such legislation to a referendum, or insist on proposing an underclass-bashing law of their own.

Yet it is clear that, if direct democracy spreads, there will be people who want to use it for such purposes. The awkward question must then be asked. Will the ordinary voter, confronted with a referendum paper which says to him, "The proposal is to raise your tax in order to help the underclass: vote yes or no", do the right thing?

The answer of direct democracy's true believers is: yes, he probably will. When people have to deal directly with an issue like this, the odds are that a mixture of compassion for those trapped in the underclass and fear for their own comfort and safety if nothing is done to solve the problem will persuade them to put their mark in the right square on the voting paper. The purpose of this newer sort of democracy, after all, is not only to save ordinary people from the errors of their representatives. It is also to encourage ordinary people to grow more responsible, and to shoulder more of the burden of government themselves--in short, to become better citizens. That is the optimist's answer, anyway; and it is not plucked out of thin air. Read on.

Why the time for change has come

The argument for direct democracy is not just a matter of beating off the mostly unconvincing objections its opponents throw at it. The bigger part of the argument consists of pointing out that the world has changed hugely since the other version of democracy, the representative sort, first came into widespread use in the 19th century. These changes make the vote-every-few-years brand look increasingly unworkable, and strengthen the claim to workability of the emerging alternative.

The idea that government by the people really meant no more than letting the people from time to time elect a legislature and perhaps a president who between elections would take all the real decisions may have had a certain plausibility in the 19th century and the first part of the present century. Even then, the Swiss were unpersuaded: they got their referendum system going 130 years ago, and it worked fine. But for most people in those days it seemed important that only a small part of the population had a decent education, plenty of money, ready access to information about public affairs, and enough leisure to put that information to

responsible use. Let this minority therefore provide the political class, which would do most of the serious work while the poor and relatively ignorant majority contented itself with the occasional broad choice between This Lot and That Lot.

That was the reasoning behind the idea of representative democracy. It was an over-simplification even in the 19th century, in the judgment of men as different as a conservative novelist like Anthony Trollope and Keir Hardie, the founder of Britain's Independent Labour Party. By the end of the 20th century, it has become untenable.

The richer part of the world has gone through economic and social upheaval in the past 100 years. A century ago, the average Briton and American produced an annual GDP of only $4,200 and $4,500 respectively at today's prices; today, the Briton's, great-grandchild produces more than four times that much and the American's almost six times (and the growth in many other countries, such as Italy, has been even faster). A century ago, few people got a proper education: only one child in France, for instance, went to a secondary school compared with every 60 who do so how, and only one went on to college or university for every 50 who do now; and the spread of learning has been even more spectacular in, for instance, Japan.

These things have enabled the average citizen of the rich world to save much more money than be could even 60 years ago, and thus to expand his ownership of shares, housing, cars or whatever. Meanwhile the amount of time he has to spend at work has considerably diminished, leaving him more time to take an intelligent interest, if he wishes, in the way his country is governed. To do that he has at his disposal not only the enormous expansion of newspaper circulation that began a century ago but also the 20th-century innovations 'of mass radio and television and, the latest arrival, a 34,000% increase in the number of networks linked to the Internet in the United States and a 27,000% increase elsewhere in the world in the past eight years alone.

This is a revolution, and it would be extraordinary if such a revolution did not rattle the foundations of a political system based on pre-revolutionary assumptions. The rattling of representative democracy would presumably have started years ago if it had not been delayed by the cold war. The self-discipline required by the struggle against communism made the democracies reluctant to think of changing their own political arrangements; so the half-way-house sort of democracy erected in the 19th century lasted longer than it would otherwise have-done. But once the cold war had loosened its grip, things were bound to start changing.

As good as you are

One sign of the change is already clear. By the late 1990s, many people have come to realize that they are as well (or as badly) equipped to make most political decisions as the men and women they elect to represent them. They have as much education, nearly as much access to the needed information and as big a stake in getting the judgments right; if they give a question their attention, they can usually offer a sensible answer. The longer the past half century's economic expansion can be prolonged, and the wider the information revolution extends its embrace, the larger the proportion of the population of which all that will be true.

The ordinary man no longer feels, as his grandfather felt, that his representative is a genuinely superior fellow. Indeed, the huge new flow of information that has become available to ordinary people by grace of electronics in the second half of the 20th century has made it painfully clear that those representatives are not at all superior. They are as capable of laziness, stupidity and dishonesty as the ordinary citizen. That may have been true a century ago, too. The difference is that then it was not generally realized; now it is.

Even a dozen years ago, it was hard to imagine that Italy's whole parliamentary edifice was about to be brought crashing to the ground because its corruption had become public knowledge and Italians were horrified by what they had discovered. At the end of 1996, Belgians are wondering whether something almost as bad may have happened in their country in the past few years. These are extreme cases. But in many other countries the voters no longer extend to the politicians as much trust and respect as they once did. Opinion polls in America, Britain, France and elsewhere all make the same point: people nowadays look on their

representatives with a disillusioned eye. That is the result of the past century's economic and social equalization, and of the fact that a richer and better-educated electorate can now keep a pretty constant eye on most of its politicians' activities.

The end of the cold war has brought another change, and this one too suggests that democracy needs modernizing. The disappearance of communism has greatly reduced the ideological content of politics. The shaping power of ideas has not entirely vanished, of course. A recognizable post-cold-war frontier is starting to emerge between a new left and a new right in the debate about the competing claims of efficiency and compassion, the proper functions of government, the best economic way to, pay for sickness and old age, and so on. But these are nuances compared with the thunderous old battles between socialism and individualism, between the command economy and the free market. This dilution of ideology has two consequences.

One is that the agenda of politics, the list of decisions to be taken, has grown much more prosaic. The choice at voting time is no longer even in theory a choice between two radically different bodies of ideas. It is a series of selections among relatively small differences of opinion about the details of economic management and fairly minor disagreements over the amount and direction of public spending. This is not the sort of thing that is best presented to the voters once every few years in the parliamentary-election programmers of competing parties. That is like being told to do your supermarket shopping in one half-hour trip every half-decade. The modern agenda of politics is much better handled by the regular routine of visits to the voting center that is offered by direct democracy.

The other effect of the fading of ideology is that political parties are losing their old power. This is important because parties--the things you vote for or against on parliamentary-election day, and the building blocks of the governments thus created are keen supporters of representative democracy. Their existence largely depends on it. They therefore oppose direct democracy. In post-cold-war politics, however, the parties can no longer claim to be carrying banners inscribed with the name of a great idea that unites a whole segment of humanity. As the banners are lowered, the loyalties that used to hold the parties together begin to dissolve; people move more readily from one party to another; parties become woollier, weaker things. As they lose their old clout, they can no longer put up so much resistance to the modernization of democracy.

These days, voters do not need a special class of people called politicians to interpret their wishes; they have learned that politicians are a rather unreliable lot; and the trade unions into which the politicians have organized themselves, the political parties, are growing feebler. Between them, those three facts can push open the door to direct democracy.

The end of the dividing line

It would be wrong, however, to rest the case for direct democracy on utilitarian grounds alone. To vote directly on the issues of the day is more efficient than to delegate the issue-deciding job to a bunch of representatives, because it almost certainly provides more people with more of what they want at little or no extra cost. But it also does something else. By giving ordinary people more responsibility, it encourages them to behave more responsibly; by giving them more power, it teaches them how to exercise power. It makes them better citizens, and to that extent better human beings. It improves the producers as well as the product.

Getting more out of democracy, and out of the people who are supposed to be the operators of democracy, was bound to take time. For most of history most of mankind has been poor, ignorant and timid. It has not been hard for the minority who had some money, a sword and the rudiments of knowledge to persuade everybody else (and often themselves too) that they were the only ones fitted to take the decisions of government.

The turning point came with the Reformation, which declared that every individual is directly responsible to God for his own life, and does not need a priestly class to tell him how to conduct that life. It then became possible for people to start working out the secular deduction from that religious premise. That too happened horribly slowly. But, two or three centuries after the Reformation, it was coming to be seen that equality before God must imply equality in the running of earthly affairs too.

Even then, this realization had a hard time overcoming the self-interest of those who wanted to insist that they knew best how to run things. In particular, a damaging by-product of the Enlightenment, the next great sharpening of consciousness after the Reformation, hindered it.

The Enlightenment was a necessary reassertion of the power of reason after too many centuries in which dogma had too often suppressed reason. The trouble was that this reassertion of reason tempted some people to think that reason could produce a scientific answer to every problem, including all the problems of politics. The most spectacular victims of the temptation of scientific certainty were the communists, who were so certain of the rightness of what they planned to do that they saw no need to consult anybody else at all. But a milder version of the temptation still tugs at other politicians. It is why so many of them still claim to possess a special skill which enables them to decipher what the incoherent voters are unable to say clearly: why, in short, they reckon they should be left in charge of the decision-making process.

Self-government and self-discipline

If you believe in democracy at all, it is hard to see why in most democratic countries the proceedings of democracy should still be divided between, on the one side, a few hundred people who take all the detailed political decisions and, on the other, the vast mass who walk down the road once every few years, push a button or mark a cross in a square, and then walk home again. Democracy, after all, assumes the basic equality of all grown-up human beings. Yet the overwhelming majority of these beings are still expected to be content with an occasional vote for a party some of whose proposals the voter agrees with, then a wait of several years to see whether the winning party does what it has said it will do, and whether it does the right things; and after that another stab in the dark to find out whether this time more voters can get a little more of what they actually want.

It is unlikely that the 21st century will put up with this for long. Of course, the fuller form of democracy, the one in which the voters directly take the decisions they want to take, will put down its roots only in places where the soil is ready.

The soil will generally be readiest in countries where economic and educational equalization his made a special class of politicians largely unnecessary: which means, at first, chiefly in the countries around the North Atlantic. Even in these countries, parliaments will continue to exist; there is still plenty of useful work for a parliament to do once it has accepted that the people have a right to act over its head. And, if the new direct democrats of the 21st century learn from the experience of late-20th-century Switzerland, they will concentrate their referendum-voting work on things that really matter, by limiting the number of minor issues that parliament has willy-nilly to send to the voters and by tight signature-collecting rules for the referendums the voters can impose on parliament. Like all good things, direct democracy needs self-discipline.

If it is done right, though, it could finally remove one of the oldest and deepest of the dividing lines that run through mankind. So far, the business of government has always separated those who do the governing from those who are governed, the rulers from the ruled. The invention of democracy healthily blurred that distinction. But it did not wholly expunge it, so long as it limited the democracy's voters to the subordinate role of saying every now and again which of various groups of politicians they on the whole preferred to the other groups.

The dividing line is bad for those on both sides of it. It is bad for the minority who hold most of the real power, because they can conceal what they are doing with their power, and can therefore be corrupted by it. It is bad for the majority, because it confines them to the generalities of politics and discourages them from voting with a proper, detailed sense of responsibility; that makes them superficial, careless and increasingly cynical. The division can now be removed. The idea that the people should govern themselves can at last mean just that.