



# The Limits of Parliamentary Democracy

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The Peter Reith Telstra Card affair, the Tripodi affair in NSW, and the enquiry into electoral rorting in the Queensland ALP. These are a few of the 'fiascos' involving politicians which undermine confidence in parliamentary politics. Politicians' performance in parliament doesn't help.

Aren't we all just a little sick of them - the cliché image of their snouts in the public trough?

It's not acceptable is it? It is my strong sense that the people's confidence in the parliamentary process is at a dangerous low.

Alongside this are the regular incidences of commercial and corporate 'misbehaviour', some of which reach the public domain eg the cash for comments affair, the despicable Bondy and Skase, the outrageous salary packages in return for incompetence and destructiveness.

But, the message for public consumption is different isn't it? The commercial and corporate 'misbehaviours' are just that, the rotten apples caught out in an otherwise good system. Whereas we are steadily being taught that rotten politicians are integral to parliamentary democracy.

This is dangerous. Should we not wonder who gains and who loses if a collective consciousness of cynicism and distrust dominates the practice of democracy? It can create conditions for a lazy and weak acceptance of serious assaults on democratic practice, the successful transference, because it is accepted by the majority, of even greater power to the rich and powerful and those who can be commanded to act on their behalf. Two perfect incidents: changes to the defence forces act make it easier for the military to be used in civil protests and, the Victorian Premier encouraged escalation of vicious police behaviour against overwhelmingly peaceful demonstrators at the S11 actions against the World Economic Forum.

The only beneficiaries of this steady erosion in confidence in what we understand as parliamentary democracy are the main drivers of the capitalist system - that is, those who were inside the WEF, the powerful transnational corporations, for whom parliamentary democracy is either a hindrance to their exercise of power or on other occasions a necessary bastion to facilitate it and defend it.

Amidst the dross of the Mal Colstons and the Peter Reiths, the growing cynicism, is there not also a deep yearning for a better form and practice of democracy, than that based only on elections and representation?

How can we as educators intervene to construct public debate and action about what a 'better' parliamentary practice might be and, what a richer more active democracy in general might entail? What is it about parliamentary

democracy that marks its pretense as the ultimate form of democracy? If we challenge what is so damned ordinary in these times with a democratic process of a public defining and fighting for precise characteristics of democratic practice which steps across national borders (values, procedures, titles, roles, accountabilities etc) and these become a public 'log of claims', what will it mean for those who undemocratically rule the roost in the economic sphere? There, decisions are made in closed board rooms, money markets, or in unelected institutions like the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation about how many people will live in poverty, how many of the world's population will starve, survive or thrive, how many will have a real say and control over the conditions of their existence. What should be the connection between true democracy in the parliamentary sphere and decision-making in the currently undemocratic (except for the limited role of unions) economic sphere?

I think the impact can only be positive for the overwhelming majority, although it won't be much chop for those who benefit by the status quo. But is this the business of adult education, to explore, define, test and change the limits of parliamentary and general democracy, to promote this type of learning? Will it fill the dangerous void? Should it extend from what we don't like, from cynicism and modest complaint, to defining what we want instead; and even further to learning together about how to confront those who make the decisions in parliaments, boardrooms and editorial offices; to hurt them with our democratic pressure so they are forced to negotiate changes with us on the basis of respect?

Any adult educator can get the ball rolling with some simple but powerful (possibly familiar) discussion questions:

- What are the 5-6 characteristics of current parliamentary democracy practice which most need to be changed?
- What specifically should be the more democratic values and practices which replace them?
- What should be the relationship between parliamentary and economic decision-making?
- How, specifically, can public support for these proposals be developed?

Is this so naïve and impossible? If you think so, go to the story of the South African Freedom Charter, for example in Nelson Mandela's biography, a story of activists and representative democracy entwined in a mass process, not just in inspirational content. Let's connect these discussions to the struggle for a just and more democratic republic (not just a republic).

The alternative - not doing things like this - ultimately is the practice of right wing politics and is, I repeat, too bloody dangerous.