Chapter 23

A New Understanding of Democracy

There is a sense in which this chapter is entirely unnecessary. It says nothing new. It merely brings together some of our observations about the developments that are needed in public management. Collectively, however, these developments add up to a new concept of democracy ... but a form of democracy which would not be recognised as such by those who equate it with some form of majority voting. The chapter will not result in a Grand Plan or Scheme. It will simply underline the importance of multiple, and in some ways contradictory, actions which, if initiated, would result in the evolution of a societal management structure, and indeed a society, very different from those we now know.

Currently, government is overloaded and it is impossible for politicians to be well informed about most of the issues about which they are taking decisions. Yet most proposals for the reform of governmental arrangements - such as "decentralisation" - are inadequate. "Decentralisation" as it is most commonly envisaged would create only another tier of Assemblies in which elected representatives would continue - like those above and below them - to rush from meeting to meeting to take decisions about issues of which they would remain essentially ignorant. If one needs further evidence of the inadequacy of "decentralisation" without much more fundamental changes in organisational arrangements, one has only to consider how inadequate are local government councillors to the task of supervising, and setting the direction for, the vast number of enterprises for which they are currently responsible. The concept of Subsidiarity, beloved of the European Union is, therefore, entirely inadequate. Tackling nearly all our problems requires a range of interventions at many different "levels" - some local and some international. More importantly, addressing them requires intervention in diverse but interacting *systems*, each of which has both local and international components. It follows that the attack on our problems needs to be organised around *systems* and neither sectioned by geographical level (across all problems) nor by sectoral domain (e.g. education) across all levels. The "appropriate level for action" varies from one aspect of a problem to another and from problem to problem.

Nevertheless, much of the clamour for decentralisation is based on genuine and well grounded feelings of powerlessness and alienation. These stem from the fact that a single five-yearly vote cannot express, even crudely, what we feel about the adequacy of the wide variety of government policies which so seriously determine the quality of our lives. We *must* find means whereby we can comment *separately* on the adequacy of these policies and ways through which our knowledge of why individual policies are less than adequate can be fed

back to decision takers so that the policies can be improved. We *must* find ways in which the actuality and significance of multiple decision takers - such as all those involved in the formulation and implementation of educational "policy" - is acknowledged and utilised instead of being overlooked, minimised, and "managed" (in the worst sense of the word). We *must* evolve arrangements through which people can obtain treatment geared to their idiosyncratic needs and priorities. We *must* find ways of enabling and encouraging public servants to reach decisions which take into account *all* relevant considerations - and especially those which bear on the long-term public interest - and thereby avoid the rule-bound "bureaucratic" decisions which lead so many of us to find the whole notion of a bureaucratically managed society so deeply repugnant.

One of our central problems is to secure general recognition of the role which public servants play in the management of society, and then find ways of ensuring that those public servants address societal management problems in a systematic, systemic, and innovative way in the long-term public interest. In other words, one of our central problems is to get our public servants to act effectively as managers - defining management to imply a swathe of activities (such as releasing energy in a hive of innovation to promote radical change in our institutional arrangements) which are very different from those which most often come to mind when the word is used. To do this we need to find ways of holding them accountable for so doing.

Once it is accepted that public servants both do and should play a major role in the management of society, it is obvious that we need to develop much better ways of supervising their work. Their role is just too great to be adequately monitored by small groups of elected personnel.

One of the most important sets of activities to be performed by public servants consists in setting up "search conferences" which will: generate many alternative ideas for ways forward, ensure consideration of systems processes, lead to numerous experiments based on different perspectives, ensure that appropriate, broadly-based evaluations are mounted, and ensure that there is an adequate debate of both the goals to be achieved and the ways in which they are to be reached. Many more people and groups - especially presently marginalised groups - need to be able to influence what happens and to initiate, and participate in, information collection and debate. To do this effectively it will be necessary to find ways of ensuring that researchers pursue ideas from alternative perspectives and to provide advocates to help to ensure that unusual views are presented in a form that merits consideration.

There is a need to evolve new forms of public surveillance of public servants in order to help to ensure that they act on information in an innovative way in the long-term public interest. Although this emphasis builds on the idea of open government, attention needs to centre on the quality of the *methods* they employ to arrive at decisions - on their *procedural* rationality - and neither on the popularity of their decisions nor the quality - or adequacy - of particular decisions (i.e. their substantive rationality). What is actually in the public interest will frequently command only minority support. In any new system, the main responsibility for staff and policy appraisal will remain within the system. What the public needs to be able to do is ensure that the relevant information is collected and acted upon, particularly when it involves negative evaluations of people or programmes. In other words, while the doings of public servants do indeed need to be exposed to the public gaze, the main need is for professional appraisal of people and projects. That information needs to be fed outward to the public and not upward in a bureaucratic hierarchy to overloaded elected representatives. The

public need to be heavily involved in generating a variety of criteria for the appraisal of public servants and public policies and monitoring the quality of the evaluation exercises conducted from each of those perspectives.

While it is essential to generate many more options so as to better cater for people with different needs and priorities, it is actually more important to improve the quality of the evaluations of those options. These evaluations need to document the long-term as well as the short-term consequences of each option. They need to document the consequences of the options in a *comprehensive* way - that is they need to document the consequences for those concerned, for other people, and for society as a whole since activities that have desirable consequences for one group in the short-term may have undesirable ones for others or for the group concerned in the longer term. Undesired and unacceptable outcomes need to get as much attention as assessment of the achievement of desirable outcomes the policy set out to reach. Information should be collected on the patterns of life satisfaction and frustration available to those who are implementing the policies as well as on the outcomes. Experiments designed to achieve policy goals and their evaluations should pay particular attention to throwing light on the hidden systems processes which so much determine the effectiveness and consequences of any particular activity. In order to ensure that evaluations grounded in a number of viewpoints are indeed mounted and that each is as comprehensive as possible, widespread public involvement is required. Public debate is also needed to clarify the ends to be achieved and ensure that the routes chosen to translate them into effect are both likely to result in goal achievement and confer maximum life satisfaction on those who are involved in achieving them.

In the past public decision-taking has often been *less* complete than the flawed market processes it replaced - mainly because inarticulate, unquantifiable, and taboo considerations tend to get be ignored. There is therefore a strong need for advocates to help translate these "subjective" and "unacceptable" concerns into words, give them legitimacy, collect evidence, and present them in an acceptable way.

Because of its tendency to overlook the needs and concerns of minorities and the way in which the coalitions which have to be formed to achieve a semblance of agreement tend to result in decisions which actually suit no one, decision taking based on majority voting should in general be replaced by the introduction of arrangements to hold managers accountable for canvassing opinion and coming to high quality, discretionary judgments about what is to be done, and then implementing those decisions in the context of an appropriate monitoring and learning system.

Researchers have a crucial role to play in helping to clarify issues and conduct surveys which make it possible to obtain meaningful feedback.

Traditional forms of democracy have not proved themselves adequate to the task of preventing the election of, or getting rid of, devious, unscrupulous, and destructive "leaders". We need more effective ways of finding out and disseminating what such people are up to.

Most widely held beliefs in the efficacy of and good will of central governments are ill founded. Faith that European and World governments will lead to more effective policing and management of resources in the public interest is misguided. Centralisation does not make "bad boys" behave: it creates opportunities for unprecedented levels of violence, concealment of blunders, information control, and manipulation of public opinion.

It seems to us that the main points which emerge from this summary of what we have seen in this book are that the most important components in any new form of democracy involve:

1. Acknowledgement of the role of public servants.
2. Means of holding them accountable for initiating the collection of forward-looking information, sifting it for good ideas, and acting on it in an innovative way in the long-term public interest.
3. Means of holding them accountable for creating a climate of innovation directed toward the introduction of a sustainable society.
4. Improved arrangements for initiating information-collection and thereafter sifting it.
5. Improved arrangements for exposing the activities of politicians, the public service, so-called "private" enterprises, and public servants to the public gaze.
6. Increased emphasis on network working within the public service.
7. Network-based supervision of the public service and the other institutions of modern society.

Such arrangements would make it possible, for the first time in history, to effectively constrain the Stalins and mini-Stalins whose tendency to eliminate those who are inclined to live in harmony with nature has brought the globe to the brink of destruction. Perhaps more importantly, they would make it possible to intervene in the worldwide economic and social processes which have led to the promotion of numerous 20th century dictators before the problems created by these processes take the chronic forms that are blamed on these dictators and used to justify war.

The Way Forward

It is often claimed that the arrangements envisaged here are unrealistic. Critics cite the "top-heaviness" of the proposed system for ensuring that those employed in our achievement hierarchies act in the interests of the public who employ them, and claim that the public would be loath to devote the necessary time to supervising "their" employees, however socially beneficial that might actually be.

It is obvious that participation in the management of the activities which contribute most to the quality of life in modern society and to the continued existence of that society is, in itself, a wealth-creating activity which merits remuneration. Having said that, it is obvious that such formulation is inadequate. What does remuneration *mean* in a situation in which money has been replaced by multiple-criteria accounting because monetary valuations ignore most of the things that it is most important to evaluate?

Either way, the way forward will be built on the wider recognition that most wealth in modern society is in the public domain: in the community support, urban reconstruction, and agricultural policies we introduce to promote health; in our planning arrangements; in our crime-prevention activities; in our management of economic differentials; in our environmental protection arrangements, and in our safety standards. Progress is dependent on the consequent willingness to acknowledge that *supervision* of such wealth-creating activity is itself wealth-creating and merits reward of one kind or another. It does not have to be an activity which people undertake without reward.

Thought about alternative societal management arrangements has, arguably, been inhibited by the hegemony of American thought. Schwarz and Thompson[23.1] show that those who have written on politics, like those who have written on market processes, have been dominated by the US notion of personal interest. As a result, politics has been viewed as being mainly concerned with competing groups trying to advance their sectional interests - with the rather bleak conclusion that little overall progress can be achieved through the political process. However, the notion that "self interest" guides actions does not stand up to examination: people change their affiliations as they have new experiences and come to see things in a new way. So the question becomes: How do people come to define their interests in particular ways? Answer: By affiliating with particular groups. Further, what is in a particular group's self-interest depends on whether the wider society is cooperative or antagonistic. So what is in the interest of the self depends on the social context - and this social context changes both the interest and the effects of expressing that interest - a point which Goldsmith has also been at pains to emphasise. The conclusion to be drawn is that the political process is much more open than many political theorists would have us believe. For this reason it is vital to nurture "unreasonable" people who do not allow themselves to be trapped into a particular form of debate. If their views are clearly stated it shifts the "centre" of any discussion. What is "reasonable" itself shifts. Schwarz and Thompson's analysis suggests that the main debate takes place *outside* the political arena so that, in a sense, politicians cannot actually decide other than as they do. Schwarz and Thompson therefore arrive from a very different starting point at the most important conclusion we have reached here. This is that it is of vital importance to conduct a debate *outside* the political system, to initiate and monitor research, and to attend carefully to links with the media.

Conclusion

We have now reviewed many of the problems to be addressed, the constraints on achieving them, and the directions which offer hope of progress. A host of developments - which amount to a new concept of democracy - is required if we are to move forward.

Many of the necessary developments can be initiated *now*: We do not have to wait for central decree. Indeed, waiting for such action would run counter to much of what has been said. The actions to be initiated should take a new direction as a result of the insights and formulations achieved in this book. We can immediately take direct action to: participate in the supervision of public provision; contribute to debate; initiate and execute research; initiate the development of appropriate staff appraisal procedures; change public expectations of public servants and promote a wider recognition of the nature and problems of modern society. We can press for: greater variety and choice; better documentation of the consequences of each option; systems experimentation; change in the nature and process of public debate; and change in the role of universities. We can disseminate information about the shortcomings of the democracy we have at present and press for a re-definition of the term. While we cannot say exactly what a new form of democracy would look like, we can say with assurance that, if we systematically set out to create a climate of social innovation we will, in the end, find ourselves in what will then be describable as a new form of democracy.

Networks of monitoring groups can be established through local initiatives. The work of Adams and Burgess in the UK, and Howard in the US, indicates the possibility of introducing aspects of an innovative climate which are *followed*, rather than preceded, by changes in management procedures. The adoption of such procedures leads to: an improved flow of information between different levels in a bureaucracy; the recognition and reward of attempts

to seek out and act on information in an innovative way in the public interest; and the creation of networks to monitor and support the work of individuals.

Yet, although there is much we can do *now*, and although it is true that, in reality, we have no option but to allow the new management structures we require to emerge, there is little doubt that the process would be enhanced by the evolution of formal thinking in the area. There is an urgent need for a better understanding of what is needed for the effective supervision of bureaucracies or "accomplishment hierarchies". For this we need at least as many studies of different arrangements in this area as there have been of alternative management arrangements within "Accomplishment" hierarchies (i.e. workplaces) themselves. There would seem to be particular merit in studying the arrangements which have emerged in Japan and the workings of Polish Semjicks[23.2].

We should conclude by underlining that many of the components of the public management system we have been highlighting are already in place. In a sense, we only need to improve on what we are already doing. In another sense, however, the developments that are needed run exactly counter to the current attempt to solve our problems through the workings of an idealised marketplace. Of course, the privatisation process is driven, not only by a desire to handle the societal management problems we have been concerned with in this book, but also by such things as the need to create work and conceal levels of government expenditure by living off the sale of assets. It has only been possible to enact this terrifying swan-song of capitalism because, although many people can see the need for radical change in the way society is run, the things brought out in this book have not been clearly in focus. The political parties which opposed Thatcherism (and which, ironically, gained sufficient support to make her reign possible) have continued to advocate realistic and reasonable policies which accept most of the current mythology about economics, government, defence, and education, and so can be seen not to address the issues of which so many people are, in a relatively inarticulate way, keenly aware. The way forward is, therefore, to be found by underlining the urgency of radical change, the real possibility of introducing that change, and, if not a vision of the future, an awareness of the societal management arrangements which are needed to *discover* a way forward.

Notes

23.1 Schwarz and Thompson, 1990
23.2 Polish Semjicks are open forums - involving the public, experts and counter-experts, administrators, and media personnel - oriented around single issues.