

Unit 11

The Future of Parliamentary Democracy

Overview

This last unit in the parliamentary democracy module reflects upon the future of parliamentary democracy, specifically on some key trends that may have an impact on the effectiveness of parliaments in the new millennium. One of the most significant trends that will shape the future of parliamentary democracy throughout the Commonwealth is the increasing push by citizens for a local voice. This trend is manifested in demands for direct democracy initiatives such as referenda, plebiscites, and recall. A second important trend discussed in this unit is the impact of globalisation, particularly on state sovereignty. Citizens fear that actors beyond their local level—international organisations such as the World Trade Organisation—are making important decisions over which they have no control. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, this has led to widespread protests against international organisations in Seattle, Vancouver, Quebec City, and elsewhere. Finally, the unit reflects upon technology and its possible effects on parliamentary democracy. Electronic democracy and e-governance may affect industrialised economies more than those of emerging democracies.

Learning Objectives

After you have completed this unit you should be able to achieve the following:

1. List the main instruments of direct democracy.
2. Outline the potential impacts of globalisation on governments and parliaments.
3. Discuss e-democracy/e-governance in terms of the possibilities and pitfalls of technology in impacting parliamentary government.

Commentary

One of the clear trends in all elective democracies has been an increase in citizen dissatisfaction. There is a growing sense among ordinary voters that the institutions of representation are not functioning as they should. Citizens are less willing to defer to their political elite than they were 20 years ago. The Canadian Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing stressed that “Our system of government is essentially an ‘indirect’ democracy. Citizens do not govern themselves directly; instead, they elect representatives to govern them. In this way, the consent of

citizens is secured" (1991: 26). A large number of voters are no longer happy with this system of 'indirect' democracy.

Dissatisfaction with the political elite and representative democracy has created a fertile soil for 'anti-system' parties. Parties of this type have usually stressed, among other things, the need to bring political decisions closer to grass roots voters and lessen the influence of so-called special interest groups as well as the public sector. These 'populist' parties have enjoyed some electoral support in many different settings and often the vote shares of the two leading parties have declined. The existence of these parties helps to deepen citizen dissatisfaction as they provide a forum for ongoing criticism of the way politics is conducted. Such parties often call for a lessening of party discipline, but their own records, when they have been elected to legislatures, serve to indicate the importance of party discipline in a parliamentary system and, again, strengthen citizen unhappiness with their existing institutions.

Direct Democracy

As a result of this trend, demands for direct citizen involvement have grown. Such demands usually include a call for one or more of three different mechanisms of 'direct democracy.' In contemporary societies, direct democracy usually refers to measures which eliminate or reduce the mediating role of representatives and involve voters either more directly in decision making, or in holding representatives accountable for their actions on an ongoing basis. There are three mechanisms of direct democracy whose use has been advocated. It seems clear that each of these mechanisms would further reduce the role of elected representatives and consequently erode parliamentary sovereignty.

Referenda or Plebiscites

The first is the use of referenda or plebiscites. With these mechanisms citizens are given the opportunity to approve of certain pieces of legislation directly, or to express their views about some political issues. The fact that time and complexity mean that not all issues can be decided by the people directly does not mean that some issues cannot be decided in this manner. There are two forms of referenda.

Binding referenda, which have been used in France and Australia (constitutional issues), force the government to accept the decision of voters. With a referendum of this sort parliament does not make the final decision because their role is restricted by the constitution. In a non-binding or consultative referendum voters answer a given question to provide the government with advice. This has been used a number of times in Canada (Prohibition, Conscription, Quebec sovereignty and the constitutional Charlottetown Accord) and Britain (Devolution in Scotland and Wales). At times their governments have not accepted the decision of the people. Refusing to abide by the wishes of the majority carries obvious risks for a government that must face re-election. On some occasions these forms of direct democracy offer governments a means of avoiding responsibility for controversial decisions.

The Initiative

Another mechanism of direct democracy is called the initiative. While with a referendum citizens are responding to government actions, with an initiative they are attempting to force the government to act in a particular area. Initiative requires the government to put an issue forward for citizens to decide in a referendum, following the submission of a petition by a specified number of voters. This mechanism ensures that voters are not simply reactive; that is, they can make demands to force governments to deal with their issues. Currently legislation permitting initiative has been approved by two Canadian provincial legislatures but it has not been used extensively outside the United States. The American experience indicates that money and organisation play crucial roles that render initiative's claims to advancing democracy questionable.

Recall

In all parliamentary democracies voters are entitled to elect their representatives, but they are limited to elections. With the third mechanism of direct democracy, recall, voters are not only able to elect representatives, but they are able to remove representatives between elections. Under a system of recall, if a certain percentage of the electorate requests a new election, a sitting representative can be removed from office and a new election held. Recall legislation was approved in Alberta during the 1920s when the United Farmers party held power. However in 1932 it was removed from the books, after a petition for recall began circulating in the premier's constituency. In a 1991 referendum, British Columbia voters called for the introduction of legislation allowing for recall. Such legislation was eventually approved by the legislature and a number of attempts have been made to remove members from office, thus far unsuccessfully. Under this legislation, recall can take place only after an MLA has been in office for 18 months. To initiate the process 40 per cent of voters must sign a recall petition within a 60-day period. If this level is reached and verified, the MLA loses his or her seat. If it is not, the MLA cannot be challenged again until after a general election. Recall has been criticised for failing to appreciate the role of party discipline. A member conceivably could be recalled for following the party line. On the other hand, it could make members more responsive to majority opinion and less willing to protect the rights of minorities.

Globalisation

The discomfort citizens feel with the indirect democracy that accompanies parliamentary government is enhanced by the perception that the ability of national governments and legislatures to make important decisions has been weakened by 'globalisation'. As Ronald J. Deibert explains,

Whereas once political authority was parcelled and segmented into territorially distinct and mutually exclusive sovereign states, today such authority is dispersing and decentralising to multiple, non-territorial domains—to corporations, bond-rating agencies and non-governmental organisations and activists, as well as states (1998: 24).

Among other things, globalisation involves the development of world, rather than domestic markets, reduces the ability of states to protect

industries within their borders, and restricts the power to control multinational corporations. Globalisation is also marked by an increase in the financial vulnerability of individual national states to world stock and bond markets. More than 130 states are members of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), which promotes competition and free trade and includes a dispute resolution mechanism. The globalisation of politics is also associated with a growth in regional trading arrangements. Many of these are based on treaties or contracts between two or more states. These treaties require states to observe certain obligations and responsibilities to the other signatories.

The most developed form of these regional arrangements is the European Union. It has moved beyond a simple trading arrangement to encompass a customs union and an attempt to create an economic and monetary union as well as shared governmental institutions. The European Union and its institutions have clearly reduced the power of the British parliament. For instance, the European Court of Justice insures that community laws are applied to all citizens of the union, regardless of the views of a particular member state. Thus despite the absence of a written British constitution, British subjects are protected by a European Human Rights Code and the sovereignty of the British Parliament is thus lessened.

States have not, of course, completely lost their sovereignty as they generally retain the right to terminate these international arrangements. Other international organizations, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, exert more of a direct influence. States wishing to receive funds from these organizations must agree to implement specific economic policies to qualify, which circumscribes the choices that legislatures can make.

Recently, citizen disenchantment with such international institutions has emerged. There have been calls for forgiving debts and protests have disrupted meetings of the WTO. Citizen action was most evident in the protests against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI). These protests, which made extensive use of the Internet and e-mail, and paid little attention to national legislatures, resulted in the abandonment of the MAI, at least temporarily.

Technology and the Future: E-Democracy?

The successful protest against the MAI and the power of the world trade and bond markets indicate the role modern technology plays in contemporary politics. As Ed Black notes, "Computers are changing our governments as well as our electoral politics. Not only do they change the way parties conduct elections and the way we watch election returns, they are changing the choices our elected representatives make for us and the way public servants deal with us in implementing those choices" (1998: iii).

As citizens have much greater access to information, they expect governments and parliamentarians to be increasingly responsive. Many legislatures and legislators are making information available on the Internet and corresponding with constituents via e-mail. Sir Francis Bacon's insight that knowledge is power leads some to believe that the proliferation of information technology will empower citizens. It is important to be cautious in such assumptions for a number of reasons. First, access to this technology is not universal either in all states or within any state. As Alexander and Pal

warn “the gap is widening between the ‘information rich and poor’.” They advance their argument by citing a 1997 study that found that 13 of the 14 countries with the highest per capita Internet hosts were in Australia, New Zealand, North America, and Europe. (Alexander and Pal, 1998: 5). Within countries access to computers and the Internet is obviously easier for the rich than it is for the poor.

Second, attempts to involve citizens more directly in political decisions through technology have not been completely successful. Attempts to broaden citizen participation in parties through telephone voting have been mixed, and citizen video and Internet forums have involved only tiny minorities of voters. Moreover, since these participants are self-selected, there is no way to determine whether these participants are representative of society in a descriptive sense, and they have no mandate to act on behalf of other citizens.

Finally, while Bacon was undoubtedly correct that knowledge is power, it is not as clear that access to information equals knowledge. Knowledge suggests reflection and discussion, while access to Internet and video information can take place in an atomised environment, leading to the acquisition of information that is devoid of context and to opinions that may not be tempered by exposure to alternative explanations.

This is not to say that the changes to modern politics engendered by changes in technology are negative. Governments, legislatures, and parties are increasingly making more information available to citizens, and more and more information is available without the media filter. The availability of more information has the potential to create a more informed citizenry and foster a sense of ownership of its political process. It can also make representatives more responsive to the public. However, it would be extremely dangerous to replace representative parliaments with electronic town halls or referenda.

Parliamentary democracy remains important in that it provides the forum for competition among parties, which remain one of the primary vehicles for citizen participation. Parliamentarians have broad access to information, the ability to analyse and reflect on it, and a forum for voicing their views and focusing public attention.

Parliamentarians in a democracy have a mandate to ‘represent’ more than just their own opinions. Many of the issues with which they deal are too complex for the kind of simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers which a reduced reliance on representative government would produce. Even if decisions are going to be made outside of parliament, parliaments should retain a role in setting the questions. Parliamentary democracy has evolved significantly in the last millennium. It will undoubtedly continue to evolve in the current millennium and continue to make important contributions to representation and governance. It is hoped that the next series of changes will make the words *parliamentary* and *democracy* synonymous, and increase citizen support of this historic institutional arrangement.

Conclusion

The future will undoubtedly see more variation in the manifestations of parliamentary democracy. The recent South African constitution introduced a president as the major political actor within its parliamentary system. Indeed, throughout the 20th century parliaments in many countries have adapted the Westminster model to fit more comfortably with local requirements.

Recent adaptations included the occasional substitution of a ceremonial president for the Crown, federal systems with written constitutions, upper houses with different powers and means of selection, charters of citizen rights, experiments with direct democracy, variations in electoral rules, and more of a role for private members. If parliaments are to both retain and regain the confidence and respect of their citizens, such adaptations must continue. In the 21st century Britain may well adapt its parliamentary structures in the light of successful examples from other commonwealth parliaments. The era of evolution is far from over.

Recommended Reading

Black, Edwin R. "Digital Democracy or Politics on a Microchip" in *Digital Democracy Policy and Politics in the Wired World*, Cynthia J. Alexander and Leslie A. Pal (eds). Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Coleman, S. et al. "Parliament in the age of the Internet." *Parliamentary Affairs* 52 (July 1999).

Reforming Electoral Democracy (Volume 1). Report of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 1991, 229-249.

Study Questions

Based on your readings, see if you can answer the following questions. If not, read the commentary over again to find the answers.

1. What are the main instruments of direct democracy?
2. What impact could globalisation have on governments and parliaments?
3. What are the possibilities and pitfalls of technology in impacting parliamentary government?

Internet Resources

The Future of Parliamentary Democracy

Berner Oberland News. "Can 'computer shocks' activate democracy?"
<http://www.beo-news.ch/nov97/Hug.htm>

Cyber-Democracy: Truth or Fiction (Kirsten Hall)
<http://hoshi.cic.sfu.ca/~cm/issue5/schreck.html>

Electronic Democracy Sites World-wide
<http://www.naturespace.co.nz/ed/edwww.htm>

European Tele-work Development Initiative. Tele-cooperation: Enhancing the Democratic Process
<http://www.eto.org.uk/etd/policy/DEMOC01.htm>

European Commission. "The Future of Parliamentary Democracy: Transition and Challenge in European Governance"
http://europa.eu.int/comm/governance/docs/doc3_en.pdf

G8 Democracy and Government Online Services Publication
<http://www.statskontoret.se/gol-democracy>

G8 GOL (Government On-line)
<http://www.governments-online.org/>

Democracy Forum. Archived Discussion: Electronic Democracy
<http://www.democracyforum.org.uk/edemocracy.asp>

Hansard Society: Promoting Effective Parliamentary Democracy
<http://www.hansard-society.org.uk>

Hansard Society: E-democracy programme
<http://www.hansard-society.org.uk/eDemocracy.htm>

Internet Tools for Politics
<http://www.politicsonline.com/>

The E-Democracy E-Book by Steve Clift
<http://www.publicus.net/ebook/>

New Zealand. Electronic Democracy
<http://www.naturespace.co.nz/ed/>

Sweden. Uppsala University: "The Evolution of Parliaments and Societies in Europe: Challenges and Prospects"
http://www.soc.uu.se/staff/texts/tb_parla.html

Union of International Associations. The Challenge of Cyber-Parliaments and Statutory Virtual Assemblies
<http://www.uia.org/uiadocs/cyberass.htm>

United Kingdom. Democracy, Community Involvement and Campaigning
<http://www.communities.org.uk/resource/democ.htm>

United States. The League of Women Voters' Democracy Network
<http://www.democracynet.org/>

United States. Minnesota: e-democracy
<http://www.e-democracy.org/>

University of London Seminar. Political Parties and Trade Unions in the Electronic Age. Transcript of Proceedings. "Political Parties and the Challenge to Democracy: From Steam-Engines to Techno-Populism"
<http://www.ubsoc.org/guides/ukseminar/Lipow-Seyd.html>

World Wide Web as a Universal Interface to Government Services. (Centre for Technology in Government, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1998)
<http://www.ctg.albany.edu/projects/inettb/univ/itttoc.html>

Center for the Study of Technology and Society: Government and Politics
<http://www.tecsoc.org/govpol/govpol.htm>