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Democracy Through the Looking Glass

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Thursday, January 26, 2023 -- Angela Fell

Angela Fell of Northern Heart & Soul, and one of the caretakers of the Neighbourhood Democracy Movement, spoke at the Democracy Summit, hosted by the Democracy Network in December 2022. Her talk explored what democracy might mean if our starting point was not Westminster Politics, but the communities where we live. This revised version of the talk includes some further reflections on how the changes we need can be made.

Perhaps democracy is different in the capital?

At yesterday's event many people expressed the view that while, we might not trust politicians in Westminster, perhaps with devolution and with more power for local politicians, we could begin to restore some trust in the whole system.

This really didn't land with me, and I don't think it will work in many towns like mine, where 67 per cent of people voted to leave Europe and where Labour has controlled the Council forever, with no viable opposition. Trust in councillors and council officers is at an all time low.

Isn't the idea that we should sit back and give our power away to someone else, to act on our behalf, totally out of date?

Especially when that politician doesn't act on our behalf, but just follows the party line. For the real accountability of a politician isn't to the people, but to their party.

Isn't that a big part of the story of how we got here?

Even the best of the emerging ideas, like citizen assemblies, often seem to suit the people who are already engaged in politics, playing to the existing audience and to predefined agendas. Often these devices also seem like distractions, more talk, with no action.

We need more than systems of representation. We need more than special meetings, that are neither meaningful or inclusive. It is only when people in communities start to become more connected, when people get to know other people, people who are not like them, that deeper change becomes possible. Not only does the health and security of a local place improve, but also new kinds of possibility begin to hatch.

Only a deeper kind of democracy can respond to the demands of economic, racial and climate justice. Only democracy from within our communities can create the necessary links to community wealth building and drive the circular economies we need.

This is what the Neighbourhood Democracy Movement is about: power in the commons, not in the House of Commons.

So what will this look like?

We are trying to provide an open space for people to connect who are growing democracy from the grassroots out (not up): for the circle, not the triangle.

These connections are important, for this is not easy work; but we do have stories to share, and we must make the time to connect, share and grow.

We cannot rely on the existing systems to save us. Current systems and institutions are too engrained in paternalism and patriarchy and are actually quite comfortable with the status quo. They also love the hero story: *we empowered you*. There's a whole industry for this now.

Our movement is about centring the people who are doing the work, so that we can have each other's back and so that together we can amplify the real work. We want community members to become protagonists in their own stories, not case studies in other people's stories.

So next year, in 2023, we will focus on using Generative Journalism as a step towards the midwifing of a post-capitalist world. For we believe that the alternative is already here, all around us, if only we turn our gaze away from the pantomimes in Westminster and Whitehall.

Take Liverpool and the emerging socially-traded economy emerging through Kindred or the great work taking place in Grimsby, Plymouth and Hastings. All these places are beginning to see where power really lies, and they growing and nurturing it: really taking back control. They are pulling together those three strands of economic, racial, climate justice. They have abandoned the idea that a political party will ride in to their rescue astride a white horse. Instead they have rolled up their sleeves and are just getting on with it.

And globally that's happening too. Over the last six months we've been bringing people together from around the world, to explore the methodology of Generative

Journalism, as the means to grow a new global community. And next year we will be thinking about and acting in a more global way through the Citizen Network.

We will also be exploring how we use data, maps and information to help communities take back control. People need to know what is going on and what is possible, and they need to have control of digital and media systems in order to develop a better sense of the resources available to tackle local problems and create new solutions. Just being able to see our own neighbourhoods on useful maps might be a good tool for collective change.

So, we aren't waiting for the next election or for the next election promise.

We do recognise that there is important work to do to reform the systems that harm our communities. But often too much focus on Westminster can be a distraction from the real work. If we are not careful we can even unintentionally prop up a system that is rooted in the patriarchy, rather than using what we have to create what we need. Engagement often comes at the price of compromise, but can you usefully compromise with elite power?

More importantly we must rediscover the function of a community of place. What is the work of community?

Capitalism has displaced community from its proper role as the producer of health, wealth, safety, care, companionship, stories and so many good things, into just one more consumer of services. It's time for communities to take back control of the production of value. That's not the job of a hero or a politician, it is the job of the people.

Not power to the people — but power from the people.

That's what we are seeking to explore in our neighbourhood of 12,000 people in Wigan, with the support of Lankelly Chase investment. We are seeking to become a self-organising and self-renovating community, backed up by good public services and with a political system that serves us.

We want to stop propping up the status quo and the patriarchy. We want to take courageous steps towards hospicing what no longer serves us, and to composting

from it only what is useful for a post-capitalist society. We want to midwife the new, because what is possible is already here and we are longing for it.

To join the Neighbourhood Democracy Movement, visit neighbourhooddemocracy.org.

Authored with Simon Duffy

This blog was originally posted on the Citizen Network website, and appears here with permission.