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# Green Democracy, Global Governance

*John S Dryzek*

I'd like to dedicate this lecture to the memory of my friend Val Plumwood, who died in 2008. Val was a first-rate philosopher and, more to the point of this lecture, one of the world's leading thinkers on questions concerning green democracy.

I would also like to acknowledge all the people associated with the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance at the Australian National University whose work I will be drawing upon; in particular, Hayley Stevenson, who helped in the preparation of this lecture.

In the lecture I will be discussing one thing that doesn't exist, green democracy, and one that exists but only in manifestly inadequate form, global governance. I will make some controversial empirical claims, and some contentious normative ones. However, all the empirical points have studies that back them up; my own, those by people with whom I've worked, and others. And all the normative claims have been the subject of philosophical treatment, again some by myself, some by others. More importantly, these normative claims are almost all sensitive to what empirical studies have shown.

## Two global deficits

In just over a month from now (November 2009) representatives from most of the world's countries will converge on Copenhagen for the culmination of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change negotiations to try to produce some collective global response to the climate change issue. Whatever the outcome, those concerned about the politics of climate change face an uphill struggle in light of two deficits afflicting global governance. These two deficits will frame this lecture, and I will illustrate my argument using the climate change issue.

The first is a *democratic* deficit. Such authority as is exercised at the global level rarely has much in the way of democratic legitimacy. This is problematic in a world where legitimate authority at any level ought to be democratic. (That 'ought' is slightly more tentative now than it would have been a decade ago, given that democracy has been on the defensive lately.)

The second is an *ecological* deficit. Global ecological problems currently dwarf the international capacity to respond to them – and whatever comes out of Copenhagen will do little to change that.

The moderately good news is that these two deficits are linked, such that any advance on the democracy dimension will help when it comes to ecological issues. Why is this?

Thirty or forty years ago many of those who thought about politics and the environment believed that the solution to environmental crisis would have to feature centralised authority in the hands of some ecologically enlightened oligarchy. In the words of William Ophuls in his 1977 book *Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity*, 'a class of ecological mandarins' would be needed. Occasionally we hear echoes of such thinking today when it comes to climate change. These generally come from people who,

whatever their sophistication when it comes to ecological systems, know little about the way political systems actually work. There are such things as social structure and economic constraint that limit what leaders and governments can do. So (for example) an Australian cabinet full of people like Environment Minister Peter Garrett would not necessarily succeed in implementing policies much different from those we have now.

### **Lessons from the experience of states**

When it comes to the effect of political structure on ecological performance, we also have plenty of lessons from the experience of states to draw upon. To summarise, these are that:

1. Liberal democracies do better than other sorts of states when it comes to environmental performance.
2. Among developed liberal democracies, the consensual democracies of Northern Europe currently do much better than Anglo-American adversarial democracies. These consensual democracies also feature more deliberative politics than their more adversarial counterparts – and I will develop this connection between deliberation and environmental performance later in this lecture.
3. But one problem with the consensual democracies (especially the Nordic countries that come out at the very top in most cross-national comparisons of environmental performance) is that they have little room for radical critique of the sort that motivates significant reform to begin. To simplify a bit, they have had to import their critiques from social movements that developed in states where environmentalists were not welcome in government and where they are forced into a more oppositional public sphere (for example, Germany until the 1980s, where green critiques flourished).

Currently there are no green states whose performance could be judged adequate by ecological lights. Obviously this is a sweeping judgement but it is quite easy to back up in examination of country-by-country evidence. We could start with Australia but that would be almost too easy, given the variety of ecological disaster areas here.

The bad news, then, is that no political system of any size or complexity has yet succeeded in effectively addressing both deficits. This includes developed liberal democratic states, which however well they do when it comes to democratic legitimation (which itself can be problematic), have yet to come to grips with ecological issues. This is for at least two reasons. The first is that effective solutions are often not going to be felt until long after the current occupants of political office have departed. The second is that most people will only wake up to environmental damage when it is large and immediate; but by then it may be too late to do much about it. This is what Anthony Giddens in his recent book on *The Politics of Climate Change* names as 'Giddens' paradox' (though it had been a staple of environmental studies for several decades before Lord Giddens very thoughtfully gave it a new name).

## How not to reform the global system

Let me turn now from the performance of states to thinking about the global system. While we can take *lessons* from the performance of states into the global system, we should not assume that states provide any *model* for the very different global context.

Most prominent existing proposals to democratise the global system do take as their inspiration the institutions found in existing liberal democratic states. Those institutions include a parliamentary assembly - there is a very active Campaign for a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly (UNPA) - endorsed by prominent politicians from around the world. This assembly would be embedded in a constitutional structure and separation of powers, and an overarching legal framework of cosmopolitan law that would regulate all international institutions and practices. The practical problems involved in implementing (say) global elections in non-democratic states mean UNPA proponents often discuss very complicated paths through interim institutional arrangements that would somehow accommodate existing authoritarian states.

There are a number of major problems that any such path to global democracy faces. There is, for example, a China problem: why would China organise, or let someone else organise for its people, competitive elections to a global parliamentary assembly? And if not, why would China acquiesce in any of the interim steps that proponents of such an assembly have in mind (for example, a reformed and strengthened UN General Assembly)?

There is also a United States problem. For most Americans (not just extreme right wingers who have nightmares about a UN takeover), there can be no authority higher than that established in the US Constitution. If you look at the UNPA Campaign web site you will find thousands of endorsements, including many from prominent politicians and world leaders, including former Secretaries-General of the United Nations. You will not find an endorsement from a single member of the US Congress or from a mainstream US politician. This US resistance is of course a problem for any institutional innovation in the global system. But any global body that is elected, or even aspires to election in the long term, would be a particularly obvious threat to the elected institutions of US national government.

There are two other reasons not to assume the key to global democratisation is replication of the institutions of liberal democratic states. First, if, as I already suggested, existing liberal democracies are not up to scratch ecologically; replicating their institutions globally may mean replicating their ecological failings. Second, the liberal democratic model itself is controversial in today's world; and its association with the developed West means that large parts of the world reject it as a model for themselves, let alone for a global polity.

How then *should* we think about the prospects for global democracy? This can be done in a way that draws lessons from the existing experiences of states, without taking any kind of state as a model.

## Democracies as deliberative systems

I think it is helpful to think in terms of democracies as deliberative systems, and this idea can be applied to the global system. One very important reason to do so when it

comes to global environmental issues, and climate change in particular, is that public good values such as environmental quality and concern for the long term tend to be prioritised by effective public deliberation. There are also three very practical reasons in global politics.

1. Deliberation emphasises flows of communication, so is 'communication centric' rather than 'vote centric', which helps in any setting (such as the global system) where voting is problematic.

2. President Barack Obama is a deliberative democrat. How do I know? Because he has said so, in his book *The Audacity of Hope* (p 92):

[The] separation of powers and checks and balances and federalist principles and Bill of Rights are designed to force us into a conversation, a 'deliberative democracy' in which all citizens are required to engage....

3. The Chinese Communist Party hierarchy supports exercises in public deliberation – even as it resists national electoral democracy.

Let me now take a closer look at the elements required for any deliberative system. A deliberative system contains:

*Public space* of communicative action without any necessary connection to formally-constituted political authority;

*Empowered space* where authoritative collective actions are generated;

*Transmission* from public space to empowered space;

*Accountability* of empowered space to public space; and

*Meta-deliberation*, the reflexive capacity to contemplate the way the deliberative system itself is organised; and to evaluate departures from deliberative ideals in any of the previous four elements – for example, when transmission happens as a result of fear rather than argument.

These five elements should ideally be *decisive* in producing collective outcomes.

## Discourses in public space

What should we be looking for in global public space? We already find many actors in that space. They include civil society organisations, activists of various sorts, journalists, bloggers, public officials working for states and international organisations, and corporations. More importantly, we find in transnational public space an interplay of discourses. When it comes to climate change, the discourses are actually multiple and varied; and the number increases with time. They include:

1. *Ecological limits*. This discourse is promulgated by natural scientists, who emphasise the degree to which the earth's ecosystems are stressed by human activity, to the point where ecological carrying capacity may be exceeded.

2. *Promethean* discourse which sees no limits to human ingenuity to overcome alleged scarcities (especially when that ingenuity is organised through markets).

3. *Energy security* under which states strive to secure their own preferred mix of energy sources – and have that mix validated by international agreement.

4. *Radical transformation* which takes aim at the neo-liberal international political economy, seeking very different structures and patterns of production and consumption.

5. *Denial* of the existence of anthropogenic climate change as a problem.

6. *Ecological modernisation* that posits economic growth and environmental protection in a potentially positive sum relationship – ‘pollution prevention pays’, as a popular slogan puts it. The problem with this discourse is that it can end up validating a search for options whose first priority is not damaging profits and the existing energy mix – such as ‘clean coal’ technology, whose attractiveness is otherwise dubious. Ecological modernisation is however a broad church, and a stronger version can contemplate structural change in the political economy.

7. *Climate justice* is a relative newcomer, and emphasises three types of claims. The first is by developing countries now seemingly denied the path followed by wealthy countries that built their economies on a long history of fossil fuel. The second is by those who suffer climate change against those who caused it. The third is by those who will bear the burdens of mitigation, be they coal miners or forest dwellers affected by REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation) schemes

These discourses all provide grist for public space in the deliberative system, but only to the degree their interplay is engaged in competent fashion by a broad variety of actors.

On the negative side of the ledger here, we can see media sensationalism, corporate spin, and occasional demonisation of opponents. For some climate change deniers, it is not enough to say that Al Gore is wrong – but also that he is evil. But these problems should not obscure the positives. Unlike (say) global financial affairs (until the 2008 meltdown), there is no domination by a single hegemonic discourse. Global finance featured a single hegemonic discourse of market liberalism, with a core hypothesis of efficient markets. It was fully occupied by cheerleaders for the dominant discourse, with critics of the system marginalised to a safe distance where they had no influence at all.

If we look at the recent history of the climate change issue, several developments are striking. One is the reduced visibility and credibility of a discourse financed by large corporations that pretended environmental concern while sponsoring denial. While the discourse of denial still exists, it has been abandoned by an increasing number of corporations – including energy corporations – who have moved to the ecological modernisation discourse. Symptomatic here is the disbanding of the corporate ‘Global Climate Coalition’ in 2002. Another striking development is the rise of the climate justice discourse. Overall, global public space features increasingly active engagement by multiple actors. While far from perfect, this is not where failures in the deliberative system are concentrated (again unlike the global financial system).

In passing, I should note that the denialist large energy corporations may have failed in public space, but that does not mean they have failed everywhere. They still have massive influence on the policies of governments – but now it is not done so publicly. This is actually a failure of the *decisiveness* of the deliberative system.

## **Authority in empowered space**

**What** about empowered space in the global deliberative system for climate change? Again, we need to identify both the elements of empowered space, and the degree to which they are deliberative. It is easy to identify aspects of empowered space, often a lot harder to find much in the way of deliberation going on there.

We might begin with the series of UN Framework Convention on Climate Change negotiations. In practice, international negotiations feature a lot of bargaining; and it is possible to map and analyse negotiation, indeed all international interactions, in terms of the self-interested strategising of states. But in international negotiations there can turn out to be a surprising amount of arguing, which opens the door to deliberation. The relative proportions of arguing and bargaining is a matter for empirical investigation. Now, arguing may be in terms of principles or discourses that happen to serve the interests of the negotiator's state; but we should never underestimate the power of what Jon Elster has called the 'civilising force of hypocrisy'. This force might lead negotiators actually to come to believe in the terms in which they argued. But equally important, the public interchange itself would come to proceed in these terms – irrespective of the motives of participants.

If we move beyond the negotiations, currently there is little in the way of international governmental institutions in empowered space. There is for example no World Environment Organisation to match the real power exercised by the World Trade Organisation (let alone environmental counterparts to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund). That does not imply advocating environmental replicas of these existing economic institutions – which suffer their own severe democratic deficits. Also what works in economics may not necessarily work when it comes to the global environment.

## **States in the global deliberative system**

It is still the case that when it comes to climate change, the most powerful political actors in empowered space are states. It is states that will have to adopt policies in pursuit of any agreement reached at Copenhagen. Otherwise the agreement may well be inadequate, as with the experience of the 1997 Kyoto protocol, where many of the states that signed up mostly come nowhere near their agreed emission reduction targets.

In addition, states may pursue globally consequential policies without reference to international agreements. Here the current difference between the negotiating posture of China and some of the policies it is pursuing is striking. In the negotiations, China prioritises development over environmental protection. In some of its own policies, it is beginning to take climate change more seriously.

We should not rule out the theoretical possibility of an effective global deliberative system in which only states constitute empowered space, and all the democratic transnational interaction is found in the public space of global civil society. When empowered space is weakly institutionalised at any level above the state, as is currently the case, that redoubles the need to attend to the deliberative health of transnational public space. I would argue that in the international system, discourses

themselves are powerful and consequential coordinating devices, precisely because formal institutions above the state are so weak. For example, for the last twenty or so years international environmental affairs have been largely governed by the discourse of sustainable development – and I do not use the word ‘governed’ lightly here. The discourse has made itself felt in thousands of government decisions in that time, ranging from city governments to states to international negotiations, in the absence of any formal institutional coordination between levels of government and across states. (There is a connection between sustainable development and the ecological modernisation discourse I mentioned earlier, though they are not identical.)

So as the example of sustainability discourse suggests, a state could obtain transnational democratic legitimacy for its actions as a result of being enmeshed in, and responsive to, some transnational deliberative system.

## Reform agendas

The global public good character of issues such as climate change means that there may be limits to the degree to which we can rely on states as the main actors in empowered space in the global deliberative system. If so, effective action on climate change is going to need more in the way of authority in empowered space in transnational institutions. Clearly a lot of work is needed to promote deliberation within those institutions, and connect them more effectively to public space in a larger deliberative system.

There are plenty of possible items that might belong on such a reform agenda. They might feature the development of international governmental organisations, the opening of such organisations to exchanges with civil society organisations, the expansion of regional blocks like the European Union (which has some potentially deliberative features), the expansion of civil society bodies like the World Social Forum, making existing inter-state forums like the G20 more inclusive and deliberative (I suppose G20 is marginally more inclusive than G8), rendering states more amenable to global concerns rather than parochial questions, and international assemblies of various kinds. However, none of these developments can or should be assessed in isolation. The only level of analysis that truly makes sense is that of the deliberative system as a whole, so particular institutions and practices should only be assessed in terms of their contribution to a deliberative system.

Here I'll put in a word for assemblies of randomly selected citizens (along the lines of the Australian Citizens' Parliament I was recently involved in organising), on the grounds of their systemic rather than their intrinsic qualities. Such assemblies have now been widely used around the world, though mostly within the confines of particular states. They are generally issue-specific and advisory rather than general purpose and authoritative. Some international experiments on an EU-wide basis involving multiple languages have recently been carried out. There are many reasons to suppose that citizen assemblies of this sort are more feasible at the global level than proposals that have an electoral end in view – such as the UNPA. Assemblies of randomly selected citizens would not *constitute* a deliberative democracy, but they are well placed to act as one focal point for a transnational deliberative system. Precisely because they are designed to be deliberative in their internal workings, actors who approach them have to do so in deliberative fashion: lobbying, bargaining, threats, and inducements will get

nowhere. This is a major advantage over any elected global assembly of the UNPA sort, likely to be populated by conventional politicians and their machinations. The high quality of deliberation in citizens' assemblies compared to parliaments – especially parliaments in adversarial Westminster-style systems – is actually quite striking.

When it comes to reform agendas, global democracy, like democracy itself, is always going to be a work in progress. Thus the paramount democratic need is for a developed reflexive capacity to work on the structure of the deliberative system itself – that is, meta-deliberation. Contemplation of the global governance of climate change reveals a deliberative system in disrepair; but compared with (say) five years ago it is getting better - at least when it comes to public space, for reasons mentioned previously. And a reflexive capacity may be beginning to emerge in a transnational community of politicians, activists, and academics who now care about the need for democratic reform of the global polity.

### **Deep green democracy**

Before concluding, I'd like to say a bit more about the 'green' in the title of this lecture. Some of my deeper green friends might point out that my treatment so far has been very light green and anthropocentric: there are only human voices in the democracies I have talked about. Now, there are many conventional thinkers who scoff at the idea of giving nature a part: obviously non-human entities cannot speak or vote. But deliberative democracy is not just about speaking; it is also about listening. The key to deep green democracy is for humans and their institutions to develop better ways of listening to communications that have their origins in the non-human world. And that does of course include communications from species and ecosystems affected by climate change. The idea that non-human species or ecosystems should be able to vote doesn't make sense. The idea that deliberative systems should develop ways to receive and respond to communications from the non-human world is actually quite straightforward.

### **Conclusion**

Effective global action on climate change requires legitimate authority; legitimate authority requires global democratisation. Whenever anyone asks me for advice on practical questions, my standard reply is that my first piece of advice is not to take advice from people like me. In the great conversation of democratic development, the voices of democratic theorists merit no special authority. But whatever you think of any substantive points I've made, I hope you'll agree that the conversation should go global. Issues such as climate change involve migration of authority into the international system; so if we care about democracy, we have to care about making that authority democratic. The only question is how.

*The Cunningham Lecture was delivered on 3 November 2009.*



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