



## Participatory democracy: A pleonasm!

Philippe D. GROSJEAN,  
Member of the Coordination committee  
Permanent Forum of European civil society, Brussels.

### Which are the questions?

The fundamental question raised by citizen participation is that of the **relationship between representative and participatory democracy**. Until this is resolved, politicians will continue to feel threatened and citizens short-changed. [...] Within this there is a further question of **the legitimacy of citizens** who enter the new spaces of governance. Is this derived from their expertise, their democratic credentials as representatives of their peers, or from the fact that they are seen as 'typical' members of a particular population group? [...] And how are they expected or indeed resourced to be accountable to their constituency? Civil society organisations face their own challenges in ensuring that they have a legitimate voice but **confusion about the source of their legitimacy and accountability means they can easily be dismissed by partners who claim that they are unrepresentative**.

*(Extract from Marilyn Taylor contribution)*

### The source of power

*The dispute reaches far back into the Middle Ages. It first took a strictly juristic form in the dispute . . . as to the legal nature of the ancient "**translatio imperii**" (transfer of power) from the Roman people to the "Princes". One school explained this as **a definitive and irrevocable alienation of power**, the other as **a mere concession of its use and exercise**. [...]*

*On the one hand from the people's abdication the most absolute sovereignty of the prince might be deduced. On the other hand the assumption of a mere "**concessio imperii**" (concession of power) led to the doctrine of popular sovereignty.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> von GIERKE O., *The Development of Political Theory*, Translation by B. Freyd, New York, Howard Fertig, 1966, page 93-94.

**SIÈGE SOCIAL**

Square de Meeûs, 25 - BE 1000 Bruxelles (Belgique)  
Phone : + (32) 2 508 30 84 - Fax + (32) 2 508 30 89

**SECRETARIAT ET ADMINISTRATION**

Avenue du Rond Point, 10 - BE-1330 Rixensart (Belgique)  
Phone & Fax : +32 2 652 27 82



## Citizens' dignity

- ✚ In a democracy, citizens' dignity resides in that **they do not transfer**, definitely and irrevocably, **power** to elected representatives, but merely **concede its use and exercise** to representatives on condition that the latter report on an ongoing basis.
- ✚ As citizens keep their inalienable rights to self-determination and self-government, **democracy demands their participation** into the process of using and exercising power.

## Democracy

*A democratic process of quality must articulate (not oppose) three essential functions: participation, deliberation and representation.*

*Space and time for deliberation is essential because it is at this time that one moves from a simple aggregation of opinions (albeit a majority) to the formulation of a genuine citizens' judgment based on information, various arguments or contradictory expert opinions and evaluations.<sup>2</sup>*

## Civil society

- ✚ Changes within society always occurred because of expectations that initiated within civil society and gradually gained sufficient pressure-power to be finally heard and enforced.
- ✚ Civil society is one of the most important channel available to citizens to **formulate** their expectations.
- ✚ Civil society is the most important channel available to citizens to:
  - Inform themselves,
  - Debate over arguments and contradictory opinions,
  - Deliberate with representatives to whom they conceded the use and exercise of power,
  - Evaluate the results from previous decisions and provide feed-back.
- ✚ Civil society is therefore **inherently legitimate** to take part in democracy!
- ✚ While representatives' legitimacy has its source in being the delegate or trustee for those living in a specific geographical constituency,
- ✚ There cannot be a similar source of legitimacy for civil society organizations (CSO).

---

<sup>2</sup> VIVERET P., *Redonner sa noblesse à l'action politique*, Le Monde diplomatique, May 2000.



## Civil society legitimacy

- CSOs legitimacy comes from the notion of *citizenship*. The action of CSOs is seen within the context of active citizenship and participatory democracy;
- CSOs legitimacy comes from knowledge and experience. The ad hoc working group noted that this criteria cannot suit all organisations and needs to be nuanced, as it would mean that a brand new organisation, would have no or very little legitimacy at the start;
- CSOs legitimacy comes from all or part of the following: publicly made CSO statements and objectives, knowledge accumulated on the field, partnerships, public support, and transparency to the objectives, the internal functions, methods, actions, and results.
- When CSOs express a concern that exists in society, ***they are not speaking on behalf of their constituents*** the way politicians would do. Often, decision-makers do not distinguish between these two aspects of representation.
- What does “represent” actually mean? To represent is “making present again”, show something or somebody that isn’t present there. In that sense, you can speak for a category of persons without being part of them or having them as members. If CSOs are “spokespeople”, they should, however, encourage people to speak for themselves – ***they do not have a monopoly on “citizen’s voices”***.

Extract from a seminar held on December 17, 2008 and organized by “Fondation pour les Générations Futures”, “Fondation Charles-Léopold Mayer” and Fondation Bernheim.

## Legitimate or Representative?

### Civil society short-changed?

CSOs are *not* due to reach a consensus because *it is not their duty* to exercise power.

CSOs are due to *express* the variety of opinions that exist on a given concern.

CSOs are due to *evaluate* how power is used and exercised.

### Politicians threatened?

Politicians *are* due to reach a consensus because *it is their duty* to use and exercise power.

Politicians are due to *examine* these opinions, decide upon them and explain their reasons.

Politicians are due to *report* on their use and exercise of power.

# FORUM

Permanent Forum of Civil Society  
Forum Permanent de la Société Civile  
Ständiges Forum der Zivilgesellschaft



## Civil society short-changed?

CSOs are trustee for nobody. They do not have the monopoly of citizens' voices.

## Politicians threatened?

Politicians are trustee for people. They have the monopoly of their constituents' voices.

## Conclusions

**Dismissing a CSO for lack of "representativeness" is illegitimate!**

**It is as if my younger brother or sister would not be part of the family council because his (her) age does not count as many years as mine!**

\*\*\*\*\*

Brussels, 17-18 March 2009.