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## Communities are the Atomic Elements of Molecular Democracy: Part 1

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Wednesday, July 8, 2015 -- Cormac Russell

In this series of four blogs I'd like to think about active citizenship and democracy. In this regard, I will **not** be writing about:

1. How we can use civic muscle and our precious collective efforts to change a disinterested technocratic elite, fired by the moral mission of "society's best and brightest in service to its most needy."
2. Reforming systems, or how we can get our leaders to be better leaders, or even how we can lobby for better policies or legislative frameworks.
3. Getting more people to vote.

Nor will I be...

4. Talking about volunteering.

Though clearly all of the above are important.

So in the realm of active citizenship and democracy, what's left? Well, when democracy is framed in government-centric terms, very little is left. However, when democracy is framed in citizen-centred terms, the field of discussion opens up significantly.

The referenced media source is missing and needs to be re-embedded.

*Walt Whitman*  
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To my mind this is the central challenge facing democracy today. A vision of democracy that puts citizens at the centre and puts governments, technocracy and corporates in the servant's quarters. A democracy that attends to eco instead of ego, is a distant one. When compared to our current versions of democracy, it is clear we have a long and difficult road ahead if this vision is to be enacted. Yet, as I understand, this is the foundational premise of deep democracy.

Hence why [Walt Whitman](#) had this to say: "We have frequently printed the word Democracy. Yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps...a great word whose history, I suppose, remains unwritten because that history has yet to be enacted."

Any hope for more citizen-centred democracy exists (against) the backdrop of a dominant narrative in the twentieth-first century that has all too often devalued, demeaned and condescended to the talents and tacit knowledge of uncredentialed people. That is, people who primarily describe themselves as "I'm just from around here," or "I'm just a volunteer."

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down affair.

Yet, our current map of democratic society has led us down a moral, political, and economic cul-de-sac. And so our first task as citizens is to recognise the map is not the territory. The second is to ensure we are the cartographers of the future; and the

third task is to get out of the cul-de-sac. In truth, I'm agnostic about what order people chose to follow. The primary error of this map is the institutional assumption which leads us to believe that the only way things are going to get better is if an outside expert or agency comes in to make our lives and communities better.

The sad but liberating fact is that social change hardly ever works that way. It is very, very rarely a unilaterally top-down affair. Added to that, the assumption that our well-being, knowledge, safety and economic well-being are unilaterally in the hands of technocrats is utterly unscientific. Let's take the determinants of health and well-being as a case in point. Epidemiology enumerates the primary determinants of well-being as:

- Personal behaviour/agency.
- Social networks.
- Economic status.
- Environmental conditions.

A democracy defined in those terms is necessarily citizen-centred, not Government-centric, since evidentially what drives our well-being is primarily (though not exclusively) determined by community assets, not institutional interventions. The same is true for justice, wisdom and care. These are not commodities that a state, non-profit organisations or for-profit institutions, manufacture and we consume.

The effective state (what some call the Enabling State and what I have come to call the Altered State) establishes institutions and supports professionals who understand that their job is to support citizen-led invention, and not to be the inventors. The effective state recognises that civil society does not in fact expand commensurate with the number of citizens needs addressed by the state, but to the extent that people's assets are connected and expressed in free space. Freedom of expression and free association therefore become enacted as the basic nucleus from which society grows, needs are tended to wherever possible by communities in the first instance, and latterly by agencies when communities no longer can or never could. And so, in this way, associations are the effective nest from which institutions are hatched to do what citizens cannot do alone.

The rightful expectation of citizens is that institutions do so in a co-productive and accountable way. When they do not function in this way, the role of citizens is to treat those institutions in the same way we treat automobiles that no longer

function: trade them in for more functioning alternatives. To fulfil this role citizens need to focus on the functions of their institutions, not their form. If we are to avoid ending up with dysfunctional bangers.

‘What is within the hands of people and what is within their power alone to change?’ This question is at the heart of the democratic experiment; an experiment which is, or at least should be, intimately tied to our wellbeing at every level in a way that is good for our planet and local ecologies as well as our fellow citizens.

In an economic model which cultivates the myth of scarcity, to take this question seriously is to be ultra-radical, since it is all at once disruptive of technocratic and corporate interests. Yet, even a precursory look beyond such interests reveals the irreplaceable functions of citizens in a democracy, since we are the primary collective producers of:

1. Our health and well-being.
2. Safety.
3. Care for the environment.
4. Safe food production and consumption.
5. Local economic development.
6. Raising our children.
7. Aging well in place/locale.
8. Building strong communities.
9. Civic action towards deeper democracy.
10. Response to natural disasters and emergencies.
11. The curation of knowledge and sharing of wisdom, culture and heritage.
12. Care for people who have been marginalized.
13. Our capacity to live creatively with the unknowable.

All thirteen are critical functions of community and civic life. When such civic functions are regularly performed, citizens and communities become stronger so too does Government. It is as though we are exercising a civic muscle each time we take on one of these functions together. There is no rulebook as to how these functions should be carried out. In fact, there are no ‘should(s)’ at all, nor therefore are there standards by which the quality of outputs might be measured. As my father says, ‘if something is worth doing; it’s worth doing badly’. All of these functions are within the domain of people powered change, which is free space. If people do not bring

their power to bear on these functions, they will not happen. Therefore, these are pinch-points, to paraphrase Peter Block, where we are: confronted by our own democratic freedoms.

Certainly from an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) perspective what nourishes people-powered change is the intentional will to identify, connect and mobilise community assets, with people firmly in the driving seat of this process. Some call this Asset Mapping, others may recognise it as an organic iteration: ordinary people coming together to understand the challenges and opportunities that face them, come up with solutions, and implement those solutions. In short, to be producers of the future. It is a relationship driven, internally-orientated, asset-based perspective. It is also not a panacea. On the road to justice, as [Jody Kretzmann](#) says, ABCD is necessary but not sufficient. We need an ecosystem of methods and approaches to advance towards deeper democracy and social justice.

The referenced media source is missing and needs to be re-embedded.

The challenge for institutions then is to ask:

- Where are we replacing, controlling, overwhelming the power of people to be producers?
- How can we listen better to what people in citizen and community space think they can do, and what they think would be helpful from outside?

These questions beg a further one, which is the subject of (John McKnight's book) [Careless Society, Community and its Counterfeits](#): 'what happens when citizens, families and communities stop performing community functions as a consequence of being colonised by top-down institutional ways?' And that is the subject of next week's blog.

## **Read the Other Instalments in this Series:**

[Part 2](#)

[Part 3](#)

## Part 4

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