Post Political Times

The weblog of Richard Allan, sometime elected representative and long-time political blogger.

Archive for May, 2003

A proposed experiment

Posted in Dialogue on May 18th, 2003

Richard has proposed the following experiment:

“I would like to see us getting together some characters who are familiar with new technology and politics, put them in a room for a while (both real rooms and online rooms) and see what comes out.”

Let’s do this when we have our Code of Politics seminar in Oxford later this year.

1 Comment »

Democracy as technology

Posted in Dialogue on May 18th, 2003

I agree with you that the fundamental question is about ‘whether it can adjust itself to the power shift that is being brought about through technology.’ But I want to reconceptualise the democratic process so that we think of it as a technology: a mechanism for making things happen or getting things done, just like any other technology.

What happens to obsolete technologies? People stop using them. That’s exactly what’s happening to the current democratic process. It doesn’t appear to relate to a need, so it’s ignored by increasing numbers of people. (I think, incidentally, that we need to make up our minds about democratic engagement. Do we want to revive it - in which case, aren’t we simply driving people towards an obsolete process - or do we want to argue that re-engagement is a rational response? I don’t think we can argue it both ways - as I argue in ‘A Tale of Two Houses’, which comes out on 3 June.)

How are obsolete processes replaced? Usually by competition. I don’t mean market competition, but I do mean the kind of radical-entrepreneurial models which refuse to compromise with structures that have outlived their usefulness and eventually supplant them. My prediction is that the next few years will see a mushrooming of competitive models of governance in lots of areas of life, from open source software to grass roots educational networks to alternative news media.

The problem with the democratic governance process (as opposed to other democratising processeses that are not explicitly about governing) is that competitive plurality is always seen as a threat. So, Parliament is jealous of its powers; government departments are jealous of theirs; lawyers are jealous of theirs. How can radical, new technologies of governance compete with and supplant obsolete technologies of governance? (In posing this
i) The two-way nature of digital ICT is transformative. Interactivity amounts to a shift in power which cannot be contained by vertical power systems. Politics as we know it can neither ignore nor appropriate interactivity. It must be transformed.

ii) If, as I have suggested, democracy is a subversive counter-balance to government, then might we be looking at a conflict between an authoritarian technology of ruling and a subversive technology of resisting? If that is so, we should be thinking hard about how a technology of resistance can be adapted for governance.

That Canadian Feeling…

Glad to read that you are energized by the Canadian conference. It had a similar effect on me when I went last year - like a breath of fresh air that gets you fired up again.

I like the idea of a Canada-UK event along the Wilton Park lines. A weekend with a group of people that fire you up can set your work up for months on a positive note.

Now, I am going to try to show some of the same energy by replying to your last blog entry…..

Civic Commons Response

In response to the ten points that set out the argument for the online civic commons, I would make the following points of my own. This is just a first foray in this direction but I think that this civic commons idea is quite properly coming to be at the heart of this dialogue.

1. While technology may appear to be democratically neutral it is not politically neutral. If politics is about power and technology changes power relationships (especially economic ones) then it may have profound, even revolutionary political effects, whilst appearing neutral.

2. Democracy adjusts itself to suit the prevailing power structures in different times and places. The question now for me is whether it can adjust itself to the power shift that is being brought about through technology.

3. There are signs that our current democratic model is not responding swiftly or effectively enough to the social changes that technology is bringing. This will create an ever-growing rift between “the people” and “the system” that may have a negative social impact.

4. I see our role as proponents of electronic democracy as being one of both seeking to influence all parties to head in directions that narrow rather than widen that potential rift and of trying to design and build the bridges that can cross it.

5. The online civic commons could be a very helpful bridge. I agree that there is an analogy with the development of public service broadcasting which has had a cohesive role in society.
7. New democratic practices that are made possible through new technology will similarly come from today’s fringes. I believe that there are signs of what form it could take in the collaborative systems that internet users have developed and the new ways of communicating that people are using with computers and mobile phones.

8. One way to approach this is to start defining the characteristics that might make up this civic commons. Some of this can be done by studying trends. We can look at where people in general are going with a particular emphasis on the younger (non-voting) generation.

9. But it is also about individuals making things happen. I would like to see us getting together some characters who are familiar with new technology and politics, put them in a room for a while (both real rooms and online rooms) and see what comes out.

10. A final point on the revolution side of things is an example of a site from the open source movement. Have a look at [Open Source Foundation for Africa](http://www.richardallan.org.uk:80/?m=200305). It sets out a vision that associates technology with empowerment that carries a strong political message. My hunch is that much of what we are interested in will come from this sort of direction.

[Leave A Comment »](http://www.richardallan.org.uk:80/?m=200305)

**Crossing Boundaries**

Posted in [Dialogue](http://www.richardallan.org.uk:80/?m=200305) on May 10th, 2003

Just an interlude, while you prepare your comments on the policy post below. I’ve just returned from the Crossing Boundaries conference in Ottawa, Canada. You addressed this conference last November and I know that this had quite a lot of impact. I found the conference very stimulating indeed and I expect to see significant developments in the e-democracy field in Canada over the next few months. With its high level of internet penetration and relatively open and participatory political culture, Canada is the ideal place to experiment with such policy ideas. The important task will be to evaluate critically what they are doing. I hope that this blog will provide a space for some of that evaluation, as well as of the activities (or otherwise) of the UK Government and Parliament in this area.

While I was in Ottawa I gave a keynote address to the conference. My notion of two-way accountability seemed to really strike a chord with them. All three key party leaders (or heirs apparent) spoke at the conference and it struck me how much more they were able to articulate in this area compared with their UK counterparts. I also addressed meetings in the Privy Council Office, Treasury Board and Parliament - and gave evidence on e-democracy to the Library & Research committee of the Canadian Parliament. I’ve returned with a huge buzz and added enthusiasm for the way ahead. One practical follow-up is that I want to organise a Wilton-Park-type conference involving key UK and Canadian (and other) players.

[1 Comment »](http://www.richardallan.org.uk:80/?m=200305)
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Links

- **BBC Action Network** BBC site for community campaigns
- **Boris Johnson MP** Conservative blogging MP
- **David Miliband Ministerial Blog** Not sure he needs the oxygen of publicity but an interesting blog addition.
- **Ideal Government** Ideas for e-government
- **Jamie's Big Voice** Blogging the experience of homeless people.
- **Liberal Democrats** Official national party website
- **Online Parliamentarian** Scottish e-democracy weblog
- **Politics.co.uk** Political news service
- **Psi Lock** A friend's blog.
Projects

- FreeThink
- Oxford Internet Institute Project
- Richard Allan
- Taking Power

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