

Citizens and Direct Democracy
What chance of reform do the major UK political parties offer?

The countries of the British Isles and the UK as a whole are near the bottom of the league table in citizens' (direct) democracy CDD (see Table, below). Way, way ahead of the UK are countries of the Baltic, several east-European countries since 1990, Italy, Ireland and Lands of the Federal Republic of Germany. The headings in the Table clearly indicate what is meant by CDD (see also definition, 1).

Citizens' direct democracy at country/nation-state level

	Citizens' initiative + citizens' referendum	Obligatory referendum	Optional veto referendum	
LITHUANIA	YES	YES	YES	
SLOVAKIA	YES	YES	YES	
HUNGARY	YES	NO	YES	
SLOVENIA	NO	YES	YES	
LATVIA	YES	NO	NO	
ITALY	NO	YES ±	YES	
IRELAND	NO	YES	NO	
DENMARK	NO	YES	NO	
UNITED KINGDOM	NO	NO	NO	

With acknowledgement to IRI-Europe

Now that an early general election has been fought off and we find ourselves in the continuing mid-life crisis of a third consecutive Labour Party government, it is time to take our magnifying glass in order to search the utterances of opposition, government, and their thinker-gurus, for serious proposals of democracy reform. Owing to lack of resources and staff (please see our I&Rgb fund appeal and remember 'tis Yuletide) we cannot pretend that this search has been exhaustive. In this December 2007 update we will consider only the three major parties.

We have tackled this question before - see for instance our report on prospects for more democracy reform, the section about what the political parties promise (2). Updating now (late 2007) we are unable to show major advances although there are mildly encouraging signs from (probably minorities within) the parties in opposition.

LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY

An interview with the leadership candidate Huhne may illustrate current LibDem thinking

Q: The name of your party includes the word 'Democrat'. Do you believe in democracy? I define the word as government according to the will of the electorate (demos - electorate, cratia - to hold power: correct me if I am wrong) Posted by ian on November 21, 2007 10:36 AM

CH: Yes I do. Clearly, representative democracy involves taking decisions not all of which will be popular, and not all of which can be popular. We know from California that voters are very happy to vote for tax cuts and spending increases, but someone has to make the books balance. So the system where parliament decides is right, with the voters having the option to throw out the rogues every so often. But I would also like to see some Swiss-style direct democracy, allowing 2.5 per cent of the electorate to challenge any act that had received royal assent within 100 days. With the right number of signatures, we would trigger a referendum. If it went against the act, parliament would have to start again.

Daily Telegraph 21 Nov 2007 On-line q+a sessions with LibDem Chris Huhne

 Expressions of support for CDD have come from a very few "quarters" of the LibDem party. Bob Russell, MP for Colchester, introduced a motion in the House of Commons for the citizens' ballot initiative at local level to be introduced by a Westminster parliamentary law. His parliamentary colleagues (all parties) appear to have ignored his proposal. Diana Wallis MEP for Yorkshire and Humberside, supports the principles of CDD and promoted an EU "citizens' initiative" in favour of a single "seat" for the European parliament (Brussels only instead of Brussels + Strasbourg). Occasional voices in LibDem think tanks have expressed support for CDD. In a recent LibDem policy statement "For the People, By the People". autumn 2007, NO promise of genuine CDD is in view, beyond the possibility of obligatory referendum on matters of constitution.

I&Rgb comment: We welcome the proposal to introduce the optional referendum which transmits the power to veto a law going through parliament. This form of citizens' democracy is (very well) known in Switzerland as the "facultative" referendum. Huhne's remarks about CITIZENS' BALLOTS however are wrong in the vast majority of cases. The claim that in effect electorates are stupid and reckless is as arrogant in tone as it is baseless of evidence. The suggestion that citizens "vote for tax cuts and spending increases" is a prejudice commonly trotted out by politicians who wish, as most of 'em, to

ward off demands for stronger citizens' democracy. Prof. John Matsusaka of the University of Southern California has examined many thousands of ballot initiatives, coming to the conclusion that "there is no evidence that voters irrationally use the initiative to cut their taxes while at the same time increasing spending," (3) (Note re. democracy design, 4).

CONSERVATIVE AND UNIONIST PARTY

During long years of opposition since 1997 the Tory party has shown little sign of embracing CDD. Their 2001 manifesto contained a promise to "look at ways in which local councils proposing increases in their budgets significantly above the rate of inflation can be obliged to hold a local referendum on the increase in the Council Tax which this would entail." Recently (2007) the party leader D. Cameron surprised the press (who had apparently forgotten the old manifesto promise) by resurrecting the same idea (Riddell, 5).

A Tory project using the internet site labelled "direct-democracy" has floated ideas for more substantial reform towards CDD. In a paper published jointly with Centre for Policy Studies (6), although praising Swiss-style democracy they then offer the British people only a limited democratic "toolbox".

On constitutional matters, they write, there should be a referendum of the electorate because "It is damaging to democracy if legislators can rewrite the rules to suit their own convenience - this way, anything affecting their terms of trade, especially in terms of transfers of power upwards, downwards or sideways, would have to win popular approval."

Further, the right of the electorate to veto unwanted legislation is also proposed. (I&R: How exactly this type of referendum can be initiated is an important point which should be clarified.)

I&R ~ GB comment: A fundament of CDD is the citizens' law proposal or "initiative" which can lead to plebiscite (decision by the electorate, sometimes called "binding referendum"). Here the Tory avant-garde is overcautious - perhaps in order to avoid frightening the more traditional regiments of Conservative support. They write "We would NOT (Ed: emphasis added) make citizens' initiatives subject to a mass popular vote, which was then binding on Parliament - the supremacy of the Queen-in-Parliament is, after all, the foundation of our political system. Instead, petitions which gathered sufficient support - say five per cent of the electorate - would have to be included in the Queen's Speech as People's Bills, read after those proposed by the Government. These would have to be given sufficient Parliamentary time - no procedural chicanery, please - and would be subject to a free vote from MPs." PolicyStudies (6).

Finally, a Conservative candidate for Mayor of London, Andrew Boff proposed: "To give London's voters the power to propose binding propositions on the executive or to recall the Mayor." (7)

I&R ~ GB comment: Although there have been some promising statements in the Tory debating sphere, there is a long way to go before these proposals become party policy.

LABOUR PARTY

The Labour Party has during ten years in government made only very minor improvement in citizens' direct democracy. Since our last review of political party manifestos in 2005 there is NO progress to report.

We clarify here that (a) the method of petition which cannot compel a binding referendum or ballot does NOT qualify for inclusion as CDD neither do (b, etc.) citizens' juries, "citizens' budgets", governance of groups such as tenants' association or school boards, referenda imposed "from above" by council or government.

There follows an extract from our 2005 review:

=====
 IR+R NEWS - news about democratic reform, citizens' initiative, referendum, recall of elected officials. A service of Citizens' Initiative and Referendum I&R ~GB <http://www.iniref.org>
 =====

Special bulletin
 PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRACY LAB/LIBDEM/CON

LABOUR PARTY

During two parliaments since 1997 Labour has introduced only very minor improvements in citizens' democracy. This is disappointing but, because there has been no strong lobby for direct democracy, not surprising.

The only innovation worthy of note is the option for citizen-initiated referendum (I and R) on the subject of local government and whether to have an elected mayor. If five percent of citizens sign the proposal, then the council must organise a referendum. The topic of I and R is restricted to only this one matter, a very limited and stunted form of direct democracy.

We do **not** regard referendum imposed by central government as a significant form of citizens' direct democracy, e.g. ballots about devolution and North East assembly. The government fixes questions, conditions and timing and the results are not binding.

Labour's 2005 manifesto does not appear to offer much hope that, voluntarily, they will return any power to the people by enabling us to use tools such as citizens' law proposal, referendum to veto government bills, recall of elected persons.

[Archived](#) by Google.com (8).

I&Rgb comment: No further comment on the Labour Party.

I&R ~ GB, FINAL REMARKS

Research has shown that a large majority of citizens favour citizens' direct democracy BUT that most politicians are opposed to it. The political parties cannot be relied upon to introduce better democracy if left to their own devices. Whichever party constellation forms the next government must be made to see clearly that the public is in favour of CDD and that failure to bring in appropriate reforms will further increase public hostility to politicians and lead to substantial changes in voting behaviour.

If we as citizens and electors want stronger, genuine, democracy then we must help to promote it. What can you do?

- Talk or write to friends and workmates about the need for "more democracy".
- Support a group which campaigns for CDD, such as I&R ~ GB. Donate, become a member, inform yourself (we will help), start a local group, offer to give a talk or invite a speaker.
- Write to the local press (on paper and on-line) to recommend the introduction of direct democracy, try "phone-in" radio.
- Ask political candidates for parliament or council to introduce CDD if elected.
- If NO election candidate will agree to support CDD, withhold your vote (abstain). Write the reason for your abstention such as "Citizens' Initiative and Referendum" or "CDD NOW" or "DEMOCRACY + I and R NOW" on your ballot paper before dropping it in the box.
- Don't forget to register in time as a voter!

References and notes

1. Definition: Direct democracy includes those forms of governance in which the electorate decides on issues, matters of public concern, as well as choosing among candidates for council or parliament. Political power is exercised by "The People" although parliament and government continue to operate as well. By using the term "Citizens' Direct Democracy" we refer to forms of democratic decision-making which can be initiated by an agreed number of citizens and which can lead to a decision by ballot (sometimes referred to as binding referendum or plebiscite). Examples of such procedures are the citizens' initiative ballot, the veto referendum, the constitutional referendum and the recall-initiative. (EXCLUDED are procedures such as petition to ruling authority, consultation, citizens' jury, "citizens' budget" or referendum imposed by a ruling authority or parliament.)

2. Macpherson M.J. Citizens' initiative and referendum in Britain and Northern Ireland 2007: Prospects for reform.. Europa-Magazin 2/2007

<http://www.europa-magazin.ch/zone/.3bb51286/cmd.14/cert.156.R6Zoar4HNvF.2>

3. Matsusaka, J. For the Many or the Few: The Initiative, Public Policy and American Democracy. University of Chicago Press 2005

4. Note. Optimal design of citizens' democracy effectively removes the risk that ill-considered decisions can be made. One feature, for instance, is the "indirect" initiative-proposal. Citizens' proposals which gain enough support go to local council or parliament for debate and decision before (if need be) going to referendum. There is much time and opportunity for information and public discussion. See the ["Three-step model"](http://www.iniref.org/steps.html) <http://www.iniref.org/steps.html>

5. Riddell, Peter. Tories pick the right issue but wrong answer. The Times, November 14, 2007
http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/peter_riddell/article2865819.ece

6. Centre for Policy Studies, May 2007 Localist papers 1. Open Politics ISBN 1 905389 47 7

7. [Boff, Andrew](#). "To give London's voters the power to propose binding propositions on the executive or to recall the Mayor."
http://conservativehome.blogs.com/100policies/2006/08/to_give_london_s.html

8. [Macpherson M.J. Manifest democracy](#). A series of posts to Usenet newsgroups 2005, archived by Google at
http://groups.google.de/group/uk.politics.constitution/browse_thread/thread/f1dd428215aa92bf/87f1c2d9c9589c7e?lnk=st&q=%22Manifest+democracy%22#87f1c2d9c9589c7e