Stephen Tierney: 'And the Winner is ... the Referendum': Scottish Independence and the Deliberative Participation of Citizens

Posted on September 29 2014

For many years there was a general consensus that referendums were a democratically problematic instrument, a weak form of democracy if you like. However, now there is a trend towards referendum use in the UK and the success of the Scottish referendum will no doubt lead to demands for more direct democracy. For example, processes of further European integration require a referendum under the European Union Act and of course the Conservative Party is committed to at least the possibility of a referendum on continued EU membership in 2017. Whatever arguments can be led in opposition to such referendums, the notion that people are incapable of reaching informed decisions on important and even complex issues has been severely undermined by the Scottish referendum.

This may also have knock-on consequences around Europe. The way in which the referendum seems to have reinvigorated politics in Scotland, and perhaps more widely in the UK, has not gone unnoticed by a foreign media which descended en masse upon Scotland in the week leading up the referendum. In many ways the strength of the process rather than the issue of independence itself became the story. Other sub-state territories will find their arguments for a referendum on independence bolstered by this, in democratic terms at least. But also those states which now increasingly turn to the referendum in relation to the ratification of EU treaties will have a role model for the effective and legitimate application of direct democracy.

The referendum is indeed on the rise in many other states, and this is itself part of a wider process of grassroots political engagement by citizens through non-conventional avenues. The politics of protest has been much talked about in recent years, but at a more prosaic level the internet has opened up a far more diverse range of sources of information for citizens, and at the same time has presented platforms for horizontal engagement among citizens through social media in ways which even ten years ago were barely feasible. Many citizens who are engaging in political argument to an unprecedented extent with many more interlocutors than ever before will not be satisfied unless they also have the power to make political decisions.

Another consequence is that arguments of principle against the referendum have been further undermined by the success of the Scottish process. It does often appear that the opposition we find to referendums in political theory and among political scientists owes more to a broader scepticism with popular politics altogether. Referendums are stereotyped as democratically problematic, not because citizens are in fact ill-informed voting fodder (if this were the case how could we legitimise representative democracy?) but because they get in the way of politics as an almost exclusively elite process interspersed by the occasional inconvenient election.

A theme of great interest today is the emergence of new experiments in applying deliberative democracy in processes of constitutional change, for example in Iceland, Ireland and Canada. What is interesting is that despite the role of the referendum in the latter two cases – in Ireland as a required stage in constitutional amendment and in Canada following citizens assemblies in British Columbia and Ontario – the connection between popular deliberation and the referendum has rarely been explicitly drawn. The Scottish process may well change this. Deliberative democracy is not just about deliberating, it is about deciding. When the people are asked to participate directly in politics it is unsurprising that they are not satisfied by then handing back decision-making power to elites; when they help frame a constitutional issue they also expect to be able to determine that issue.
The referendum is not a perfect device, and if not properly regulated it can indeed be manipulated by elites. But if the process is properly designed we now know it can work well. The Scottish referendum has not changed the borders of the UK but it has challenged the boundaries of our imagination. Constitutional politics may never be the same again.

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This post first appeared on the ICONnect blog.

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