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A Productive Challenge Unelected Representatives Can Enrich Democracy

John Keane

Kurzgefasst: Persönlichkeiten des öffentlichen Lebens, die keine politische Funktion (mehr) haben, können auf Grund ihrer persönlichen Autorität, ihres öffentlichen Rufs und ihrer (politischen) Erfahrung eine wichtige Rolle in der repräsentativen Demokratie spielen, besonders in Zeiten der Politikverdrossenheit. Ihre politische Unabhängigkeit gibt ihnen die Möglichkeit, auf Missstände und Versäumnisse der Regierungen und Behörden hinzuweisen und so als Korrektiv wirken.

Summary: Unelected representatives can play important roles in the age of monitory democracy, especially in times when elected representatives lose credibility. Even though they are not formally elected, these public figures can do good works for democracy. Their personal or group authority enables them to draw attention to the violation of public standards by governments, highlight their policy failures, and serve as correctives to the undue dominance of state-centred definitions of leadership.

During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, in various parts of the Atlantic region, the meaning of citizenship was profoundly transformed by the advent of representative democracy. Central to its definition and functioning was the principle that citizens in a democratic state are entitled periodically to elect candidates to representative assemblies and executive offices which hold the reins of governmental power.

Often contrasted with aristocracy and monarchy, representative democracy was from the outset praised by a wide spectrum of political writers and public figures. Thomas Jefferson, the Marquis de Condorcet and John Stuart Mill are among the best known defenders of the view that representative democracy was a way of governing better by openly airing differences of opinion – not only among the represented themselves, but also between representatives and those whom they are supposed to represent. Representative government was also hailed as an effective new method of apportioning blame for poor political performance; a new way of encouraging the rotation of leadership, guided by merit. For those who disliked the restricted (male, property-owning) franchise and who therefore found these arguments suspect, the earliest champions of representative democracy offered a more pragmatic justification of representation. It was seen as the practical expression of a simple reality: that it wasn't feasible for all of the people to be involved all of the time, even if they were so inclined, in the business of government.

The principle that representatives decide things on behalf – and in the physical absence – of those citizens who are affected was from the outset structured by what can be called the disappointment principle. Elections are still today seen as a method of tripping up leaders and throwing them out of office if and when they fail, as often they do. Every election is as much a beginning as it is an ending. The whole point of elections is that they are a means of disciplining representatives who disappoint their citizen electors, who are then entitled to throw harsh words, and paper or electronic rocks, at them. If representatives were always virtuous, impartial, competent and responsive, then elections would lose their purpose.

The disappointment principle coded into the principles and practice of representative democracy helps to account for the contemporary resurgence of populism. But it also helps explain why in our time 'unelected representatives' attract great media attention and public support. Among the striking features of media-saturated monitory democracies is the rapid growth and diffusion, well beyond the reaches of elected government, of individuals, groups and organisations who stand up for causes and carve out public constituencies that are often at odds with the words and deeds of established political parties, elected officials, parliaments and whole governments. Whatever may be thought of their particular brand of politics and the particular issues they stand for, unelected representatives alter the political geography of democracies. They add to the sense of pluralism pervading democratic politics – along the way creating headaches for established representative mechanisms.

But who or what are unelected representatives? The phrase is unfamiliar. It grates on democratic ears, so it is important to understand carefully its meaning, and the trend it describes. Unelected representatives are public figures who get media attention. They are often extroverted characters. They enjoy notoriety; they are famous but they are not simply 'celebrities', a term which is too wide

and too loose and too normatively burdened to capture their core quality of being unelected representatives of others' views.

Unelected representatives are not in it for the money and they are not fame seekers, or 'million-horsepowered entities' (McLuhan). They are not exaltations of superficiality; they do not thrive on smutty probes into their private lives; and they do not pander to celebrity bloggers, gossip columnists and tabloid paparazzi. The figure of the unelected representative is not what Germans call a Hochstapler, an imposter who brags and boasts a lot. Unelected representatives instead stand for something outside and beyond their particular niche. More exactly: as public representatives they simultaneously 'mirror' the tastes and views of their public admirers as well as fire their imaginations and sympathies by displaying leadership in matters of the wider public good.

Unelected representatives widen the horizons of the political even though they are not chosen in the same way as parliamentary representatives, who are subject to formal periodic elections. It is true that there are times and places where unelected representatives – an example is Wangari Muta Maathai, the first African woman to win the Nobel Prize and the founder of the pan-African grass-roots Green Belt Movement – decide to reinvest their fame, to make a lateral move into formal politics and go on to win elections. Helmut Schmidt, Mary Robinson, Jimmy Carter, Nelson Mandela, Al Gore and others do exactly the reverse, by pursuing public leadership roles after elected office. But elections or governmental politics are not the normal destiny or career path of unelected representatives. What is striking is that they typically shun political parties, parliaments and government. They do not like to be seen as politicians. Paradoxically, that does not make them 'second best' or 'pseudo-representatives' or any less 'chosen' or legitimate in the eyes, hearts and minds of citizens. It often has the opposite effect.

Unelected representatives enjoy robust public reputations and they exercise a form of 'soft' power over others, including their opponents. They are listened to, admired, sometimes adored, often mimicked or followed; and to the extent that they are influential in these ways they may, and often do, present challenges to formally elected representatives, for instance by praising or criticising their work. So what is the basis of their unelected fame? To put things simply: what's the source of their popularity and how are they able to use their authority to stand apart from elected representatives?

Any democratic theory of unelected representation must understand that there are many different types of unelected representatives. Some draw their legitimacy from the fact that they are widely regarded as models of public virtue. Figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Princess Diana and Han Han (China's hottest blogger) are seen to be 'good' or 'decent' or 'wise' or 'daring' people who bring honesty, fairness and other valuable things to the world. Other unelected representatives – Mother Teresa or Desmond Tutu – win legitimacy because of their spiritual or religious commitments. There are unelected representatives whose status is based instead on merit; they are nobodies who become somebody because they are reckoned to have achieved great things. Amitabh Bhachan (India's screen star whose early reputation was built on playing the role of fighter against injustice), Colombian-born Shakira Mebarak and the Berliner Philharmoniker (the latter two are Goodwill Ambassadors of UNICEF) belong in this category of achievers. Still other figures are deemed representatives of suffering, courage and survival in this world (the Dalai Lama is an example). There are other unelected representatives who win legitimacy because they are different from political party leaders and governments who 'fudge' issues, and because they have taken a principled stand on a particular issue, on which they campaign vigorously, in the process appealing for public support in the form of donations and subscriptions. Bodies like Amnesty International are of this type: their legitimacy is mediated not by votes, but by means of moral monetary contracts that can be cancelled at any time by admiring supporters and subscribers who have grown disappointed with their performance.

Whatever may be thought of their stardom, unelected representatives can do good works for democracy. Especially in times when politicians as representati-

[Foto: Udo Borchert]

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ves are suffering (to put it mildly) a mounting credibility gap, unelected representatives stretch the boundaries and meaning of political representation, especially by putting on-message parties, parliaments and government executives on their toes. They contribute to the contemporary growth of monitory forms of democracy, for instance by drawing the attention of publics to the violation of public standards by governments, their policy failures, or their general lack of political imagination in handling so-called 'wicked' problems that have no readily agreed upon definition, let alone straightforward solutions.

Unelected representatives also force the citizens of existing democracies to think twice, and more deeply, about what counts as good leadership. They serve as an important reminder that during the course of the past century the word leadership was excessively politicised, to the point where we have forgotten that the words leader and leaderess, from the time of their first usage in English, were routinely applied to those who coordinated such bodies as singing choirs, bands of dancers and musicians and religious congregations.

Unelected leaders can have profoundly transformative effects on the meaning of leadership itself. They serve as an important corrective to the undue dominance of state-centred definitions of leadership; and they multiply and disperse different and conflicting criteria of representation that confront democracies with problems (such as whether unelected leaders can be held publicly accountable for their actions using means other than elections) that were unknown to the earliest champions and architects of representative democracy. Thanks to their efforts, leadership no longer only means (as it meant in Max Weber's classic state-centred analysis) bossing and strength backed ultimately by cunning and the fist and other means of state power. Unelected representatives remind citizens that Realpolitik understandings of leadership can easily slide towards political authoritarianism, as happened in countries such as Germany, where until today the words Führer and Führerschaft have a bad name. Unelected leadership breaks up this pattern. Leadership instead comes to be understood as the capacity to mobilise 'persuasive power' (as Archbishop Desmond Tutu likes to say). It is the ability to motivate citizens to do things for themselves.

Unelected leadership is certainly a challenging art. 'A determination to be courageous; an ability to anticipate situations; the inclination to dramatise political effects, so as to warn citizens of actual or potential problems; above all, the willingness to admit that mistakes have been made, to urge that they must be corrected, without ever being afraid of making yet more mistakes', is how Emílio Rui Vilar, former senior minister of the first post-Salazar governments, former Deputy Governor of the Bank of Portugal and Director-General of the Commission of the EU explains it. Unelected leadership is many things. It is the learned capacity to communicate with publics about matters of public concern. It is the art of winning public respect by cultivating 'narrative intelligence' that includes (when unelected representatives are at their best) a mix of formal qualities, such as level-headed focus; inner calm; courteousness; the refusal to be biddable; the ability to listen to others; and poking fun at oneself.

Unelected leadership certainly includes a radiance of style (one of the confidants of Nelson Mandela once explained to me his remarkable ability to create 'many Nelson Mandelas around him'; the same thing is still commonly said of Jawarhalal Nehru). The qualities of unelected leadership further include the power to use media to combine contradictory qualities (strength and vulnerability; singularity and typicality, etc.) simultaneously, and apparently without effort, as if leadership is the art of gestalt-switching. Above all, and finally, unelected leadership demands awareness that leaders are always deeply dependent upon the people known as the led – that true leaders lead because they manage to get citizens to look up to them, rather than hauling them by the nose.

Reference

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