Public Service and the democratic deficit.

by Anetta Debicka LL.M, Prof. Dr Marek Debicki

In recent years in both “old” and “new” democracies we increasingly have evidence of declining participation in public life and citizens’ dissatisfaction with the system performance.

Increasingly both academic and government analysis use the term democratic deficit to describe this illness of contemporary political systems viewing themselves as democracies.

Most of the academic literature and political opinions on the issue concentrate on providing examples of malfunctioning institutions and are reporting result’s of alarming public opinion polls showing increasingly negative opinions about “the system” of increasing number of citizens.

The content of the concept of “democratic deficit” is very rarely defined. It is unclear if there are significant and permanent changes of political culture in postindustrial societies and the notion of political participation is less attractive to the citizens or perhaps institutions fail to provide meaningful avenues of participation and genuine involvement in public life. Perhaps we are moving to a culture, which rejects collective goals and behavior, and prefer highly self-centered and self-actualizing life.

It is also unclear if this is a problem caused by political elites alone and thus attempts at reversing such trends have to be undertaken by political actors alone or if the public services are also contributing to the democratic deficit.

It can be argued that the manner in which our institutions operate is becoming increasingly incongruent with the postindustrial societies. We also observe a significant shift in the division of power between main structures in most of political systems.

Relationships between bureaucracies and political institutions as well as the citizenry are undergoing significant changes. The way in which public service interacts with the public and the perceptions of bureaucracy are an important part of the overall change.

Political parties are no longer (if they ever where) a viable linkage between citizens and state institutions, their role is practically limited to provision of alternative personnel for legislative bodies (and some other institutions).

Public services have the capacity for acting as a two ways communicational channel in which citizens can participate in those matters, which they (and not politicians) consider as vital. Politicians attempt to provide an ideological interpretation of the system and policy alternatives, but it will be argue that we no longer live in an age of ideologies and reduction of democratic deficit can be primarily reduced by the way in which policies are administered rather than through policy change and secondly such changes are to a large extent a product of technocrats and not politicians who lack the specialized knowledge necessary for such work.

* Anetta Debicka LL.M, Ph.D. candidate.
* Prof. Dr Marek Debicki, Leon Kozminski Academy of Entrepreneurship and Management, Warsaw, Poland; Associate Chair MPA/JDC University of Manitoba, Canada
Voices describing and expressing concern about declining citizen participation in public life are more and more frequent. Government reports from all over the world provide evidence of declining participation in elections, even in such important referenda as those conducted last spring in the ten countries, which applied for membership in the European Union. Another illustration of this trend could be seen in the fact that in the constitutional referendum in Poland in 1997 only 42.86% of the eligible voters participated in that historical event. In those countries, which required participation of at least fifty percent of eligible voters, there were considerable worries that insufficient numbers of voters would participate in those crucial decisions radical changes resulting from entrance to the European Union. Participation in the recent election to the European Parliament in most countries was also extremely low.

In practically every developed country, survey after survey indicates increasing dissatisfaction of the citizens with traditional democratic institutions as well as growing cynicism towards politicians and bureaucrats alike. Similar phenomena are observed in those countries, which only a decade ago were celebrating abolishment of authoritarian (or if anybody prefers the term, totalitarian) regimes. Surveys in the “old” democracies also show among their citizens growing apathy, distrust, and unwillingness to participate in the process of governance.

Academic literature also points in that direction. R. Putnam’s Bowling Alone was one of the first books showing steady decline in political participation among adult Americans.2 This downturn is not limited to the decline in voting (particularly in local elections) but also in party membership and public interest pressure groups.

What is even more alarming is the fact that this trend is more pronounced amongst younger citizens. The “old” social science reported that as we grow older, our rate of participation in politics declines. Now, however, the younger generation is also part of this growing withdrawal from participating in the life of the polis.

A longitudinal study in 13 advanced democracies conducted by Susan Pharr and Robert Putnam shows a steady decline in public trust and support for politicians, which the authors label “crisis of confidence.”3 In 1996 John Manon Lecture R.D. Putnam provided evidence of significant decline in voting in America in the post WWII period. In the last two decades participation in civic organizations in US declined by some 40%. In the 70s some 73% of Americans trusted their, government presently this trust is expressed by only 20%.4 Similar findings have been reported by Carty et al., Cross and score of others.5 F.D. Weil provides evidence of decline in public trust in USA, France, Spain, England and Germany in the last forty years.6 In 2002 Gallup and Environics conducted a global survey of trust in public institutions. In aggregate terms based on global data, 40% of citizens distrust the governments, 49% distrusts judicial institutions and 51% of the citizens of all countries don’t trust the legislative institutions. In Central and Eastern Europe distrust of the legislative bodies is expressed by some 65% of the citizens. Extremely alarming are the views of citizens of that region on the legitimacy of elected bodies – some 70% denies them legitimacy. We also see decline of trust from year to year in most countries (and particularly in Central and Eastern Europe).7 Similarly in that region there is a lack of trust and negative feelings towards corporations. Another survey measuring public confidence and trust in legislative bodies, courts and

---

1 OECD surveys show that in the former soviet block countries lack of trust in politicians, the “government” and the public servants ranges from 60 to 94%. Similar findings have been reported with respect to the local government.
4 R.D. Putnam, John Manon 1996 Lecture p.3
7 www.voice-of-the-people.net.
governments in the Balkan states shows that only some 18%-20% of citizens trust these institutions (exception being 50% trust in courts by Romanians and citizens of Kosovo)\(^8\). A very recent survey by CBOS in Poland shows that between 1993 and 2005 dissatisfaction and lack of trust in government increased from 52% to 63% of national sample. What is even more alarming is the data showing that 40% of Poles state that it doesn’t matter which party will govern.\(^9\) Surveys on a local level show equally alarming trends. In 2004 Management Systems International conducted a survey in Vladivostok. Only about 6% of the citizens of that city trust local and regional governments and 61% is of the view that bribery and corruption are unavoidable.\(^10\) It has to be stressed that presentation of attitudinal data doesn’t show objective state of national or local governance. Such attitudes indicate decline of the support for the system and its institutions.

Nevertheless this growing dissatisfaction results from negative economic and social performance, lack of achievement of any given country, and the increased visibility of the corruption of political and bureaucratic elites. As President Ronald Reagan put it, very clearly “we have declared war on poverty and poverty won.” It is generally accepted that the gap between the top 20% of income earners and the bottom 20% has been increasing in most countries. Poverty, famine, and child death in the least developed countries is also at alarming or catastrophic level. We also accept structural unemployment. Such findings are reported on both national and international levels. Citizens’ lack of trust in political institutions has strong objective foundations.

In the past, it was maintained that as long as we didn’t question or examine the normative components of the notion of democracy, we trusted both our institutions and our leaders. It is now hypothesised by some scholars, however, that democracy made promises, which were simply unattainable. With the increase of the levels of education and increased attitudes of safety as well as availability of information, blind trust in our governments is gradually replaced by cynicism and disappointment. This inversion occurs at a time of growing deficits and political successes of neo-conservatives with unshakable faith in the market as the only place capable of producing well-being of societies instead. Keynes has been replaced by Friedman with his powerful critique of the public system of delivery of goods and services. Perhaps it could be viewed as a symbol of such developments that during the last Presidential election in the US the word “liberal” was a pejorative term in the view of many. In this time of threats to universal services and real or exaggerated danger coming from terrorists who defy basic norms of any civilized society, we need more participation and active citizens rather than withdrawal both in affective and behavioural terms.

We should be also mindful that practically all developed societies are rapidly aging. By the year 2025 in most developed countries some 25% of citizens will be over the age of sixty-five. When combined with the unchartered future of post-industrialism, these conditions create societies in which it is not easy to trust the political institutions and bureauocratic managers who don’t seem to have real answers beyond slogans.

M. Macpherson states this view in very strong language, “in its 130 year history, the modern party state has developed into an oligarchic system of rule, in which parties have degenerated into para-democratic organizations which only feign representative procedures of decision–making”.\(^11\) Such statements are supported

---

\(^8\) www.idea.int/europe_cis/balkans.
\(^10\) www.msiworldwide.com/antcorruption.
by survey data, which shows that, for example, in Germany only 24% of citizens believe that democracy is both effective and available to the citizens. Similar results come from even such countries as Sweden, which many of us view as one of the most advanced democracies. It is now generally accepted that even advanced democracies suffer from an “illness” which has been labelled the “democratic deficit.” Although this term has entered our political vocabulary there is no agreement as to the meaning of this term and even fewer ideas what, if anything, can be done in order to cure democracies from this “disease.” Andrew Moravcsik is perhaps right in saying that the problem of democratic deficit is “...emerging as one of the central questions—perhaps the central question—in contemporary world politics.”

Moravcsik analyses the problem in the context of international institutions but his analysis is equally applicable to domestic regimes. He starts by bringing to our attention the fact that we have at least four different notions of democracy that are applicable to and practiced in some fashion by all modern democratic state. Thus we have the libertarian notion of democracy. In this model, the basic function of the state is to protect citizens against possible misuses of power resulting in the arbitrary, corrupt, or tyrannical behaviour of the state and its agents.

In that conception, individual rights are paramount to the interests of the majority. Those who adhere to this view have little, if any, trust in the government and see modern technology (including IT) as a potentially dangerous “weapon” in the hands of the self-serving technocrats or those who can purchase or control their services.

The second model is the pluralist concept of democracy in which citizens have at least potentially equal opportunity to effect policy outcomes. Representative democracy was supposed to be the basic tool to transmit the policy demands of citizens. Critics point out that in the pluralist view, we live in “delegative” democracies where the connection between political and bureaucratic elites is to a large extent a symbolic one. On the basis of such conceptions, Jeff Rubenfeld, a Yale constitutional lawyer, cautions against the United States joining many international conventions and subjecting itself to the jurisdiction of international organizations. He is of the view that the United States is the closest country to the ideal democracy, which should provide broad avenues for citizens to participate in setting policy objectives. Thus entering into such agreements would have negative impacts on the quality of the democratic process in the USA.

Thirdly, we have the social democratic view of democracy, which emphasises the function of distributing goods and services in a manner providing for the greatest possible equality for the greatest possible number of people.

The final concept is frequently labelled as the deliberative democracy. In this model, we must be provided with the means for meaningful and effective participation in both setting priorities and making decisions themselves. This notion of democracy concentrates on the need for empowerment of citizens in addition to the provision of substantive rather than procedural equality.

It should be stated that practically all surveys examining attitudes towards the state report a strong positive correlation between the strength of negative attitudes and lack of trust in the state and its institutions and a need for meaningful participation. Secondly the levels of negative attitudes are lowest in countries with the most developed system of policies traditionally associated with welfare state. Those correlations are strongest among

---

15 See f. e. C.E. Lindblom, Politics and Markets, New York Basic Books 1977; similar views are also found in the works of Karl Polanyi.
those respondents that are increasingly referred to as “post-materialists”. These respondent are well educated, well informed about politics, relatively affluent and otherwise would have been perfect candidates for membership in political or bureaucratic elites.

Of course, in real life none of these typologies is found in a pure form. It is more a question of balance and perceptions as to the direction policy makers are taking. Regardless of the type of democracy which any group or individual views as the most desirable, democratic deficit always points out the following “weaknesses” of the democratic values in the practice of even the least distrusted institutions and sub-elites.

Without a doubt, political responsibility and decision-making has been delegated to rather narrow groups or even to individuals occupying strategic positions within the state. More and more expertise is required to understand policy options or policy content even in the most general terms. Many citizens are neither capable nor prepared to commit their time and personal resources to participation in the very complex analysis and decision-making processes.

Research also indicates that most of us are driven by the desire to avoid risk. Innovative policies will therefore be most frequently evaluated through the perception of their potential for increasing risk.

We also observe increasing participation in the decision processes of the powerful interest groups motivated primarily by their narrow economic interests. As a result, we have strong support among such groups for privatization of public services and deregulation in practically all modern democracies.

Governing elites, however, are increasingly worried by the lack of trust and support for the system. At some point, such negative attitudes could translate into anti-systemic behaviour and undermine the stability of the market democracies. After all, democracy has a relatively short history and all previous systems of governance, including the most repressive and powerful empires, have collapsed. (Nobody predicted that the Soviet Union would dissolve itself within such a short period of time the same could be the fate of other states no matter how powerful).

Practically all political parties, legislative bodies, and executives are trying to understand the causes of such attitudes among ever increasing number of citizens and are attempting to reduce the perceived and real democratic deficit. Governing elites need our support and understand that the problem has to be addressed both by changes in elite behaviour with the objective of creating a culture of trust, support, and increased levels of citizen participation.

Nobody questions the proposition that democracies will perform better if citizens are well informed and engaged in public life.¹⁶ The problem with that hypothesis lies in the fact that those citizens who are best informed and also have post-materialist values are at the same time the harshest critics of their governments. They also show little trust in the system and its central actors, along with having the highest level of demands for new or increased avenues of participation. They also already participate at a relatively higher level than the rest of citizens in any country.

---

Secondly, research on learning indicates that for effective learning, those who participate in the learning process must trust both the messenger and the message. There is a high probability that increased information provided by the “system” will be received with mistrust and therefore might not have the intended effect.

Some see Information Technology as a tool which can reverse the decline of both trust and citizen participation and therefore increase the quality of democracy. It should be pointed out that at this point the civil service becomes the lead institution in terms of policy design and implementation. Information technologies are very complex and require high level of technical knowledge, most (or practically all) politicians have only totally superficial understanding of such matters. It is up to civil servants to design and implement this technology in a manner increasing both institutional performance and citizens’ trust in the government and all public institutions.

Information Technology has a role in the process of increasing trust in government and the level of participation in traditional political activities. Governments view with great optimism the potential which that technology offers to ailing democracies, especially in that IT generates new avenues for exercising direct democracy, however its potential and impact is perhaps overestimated.

Without a doubt, IT is a very good tool for managing both people and programs. It can assist in faster decision making processes on the basis of better information. Computer simulations are used for many years as tools for designing budgets, but do we see improved public finances or decline of deficits as a result of utilization of such techniques? We have a rather extensive and rapidly growing body of literature showing benefits of IT in managerial decisions. This technology has capacity of lowering the cost and creating greater sophistication in managing the public sector. Achievements in this area are unquestionably very impressive.

IT also assists in better and faster service delivery, which is clearly to the benefit of citizens. By the end of 2005, Germany will have all governmental services on-line and several countries are not far behind. In many countries we can send our tax returns by e-mail and obtain ever increasing numbers of forms as well as send them to the appropriate offices. Unfortunately, IT as a tool for collecting, distributing and analysing information does not discriminate between an authoritarian regime and a democratic one. Such technology could be a frightening tool in the hands of a regime wanting to engage in “ethnic cleansing”, among other evils. It is hard to see IT’s positive contributions to the development of democracy if the information we can get is mostly about services we don’t want or are not available.

Surveys indicate that the rapid growth of IT didn’t result in corresponding increase in the number of citizens who feel well informed about and interested in politics. There is also no evidence that IT provided more avenues for meaningful participation in policy setting or decision making processes. To the contrary: from year to year we have increasing numbers of citizens in highly developed democracies utilizing or having access to the Internet and yet at the same time we observe decline in positive attitudes towards the political institutions and elites.

This alone puts in question the hypothesis expressed by practically all governments that IT provides for new and more meaningful avenues of co-governance. We also see no evidence of the changes to freedom of information

---

17 For example Canadian Election Study shows increase in the numbers of those interested and informed about politics from 14% in 1974 to 19% in 1984 and some 23% in 2001 similar findings come from the already cited World Survey and the European Survey.
legislation. The existing legislation and access to information it provides is used by businesses to a much higher degree than by citizens.\(^{18}\)

Many studies of political participation point to communication with citizens by political parties, institutions, and the media as a factor having the potential to act as a mobilizing agent.\(^{19}\) At the same time as Internet usage increases in the United States, voter participation declined to the point that United States ranks 138\(^{16}\) out of 171 countries, when results are averaged from 1945 to 1998. In European Parliament elections, participation declined from 63% in 1979 (for all countries) to 49.2% in 1999, with Great Britain reporting only 23% of eligible voters casting their ballots.

Various surveys show significant increase of usage of the Net as a source of political information. In the US in 1995, eleven million citizens regularly got news from the Net and in 1998 this figure rose to thirty-six million.\(^{20}\) Very similar trends are observed in Europe. Data, however, shows that only a very small minority of Net users utilize this technology for active forms of civic participation. After analysing both American and European data, Norris Pipa indicates that only about 4% of Net users utilize it as a means of participation in politics.\(^{21}\) It is also interesting to note that the group of Net activists show higher than average satisfaction with “the system”. They are therefore not the population, which has to be attracted and convinced as to the value of participation if we are to reduce the democratic deficit.

Most data clearly indicates that claims made by governments of advanced post-industrial societies that IT does increase the quality of democracy on the mass level are so far without foundation or at best overstated. One is reminded that many decades ago we thought that television would create a global village with all or most of us belonging to one clan. So far, perhaps, the greatest use of IT has been the movement money with unprecedented speed in unprecedented quantities with almost total freedom thus facilitating co-operation of global corporations. Assessment of the impact of global corporations on democracy is beyond the scope of this paper, however, it is rather clear that the leading global corporations so far have not contributed to the reduction of the democratic deficit.

In the last decade we have (largely due to the impact of the New School of Public Management) we have concentrated on changes of public services in such a manner as to equip them with skills and tools of private sector management. From this type of analysis a consensus has emerged as to the primary goals and objectives of the public sector. The “reinvented” public service has to provide prudent financial management and improved – citizen oriented systems of service delivery. (I on purpose exclude discussion of the analysis and prescription of public policies and policy areas from which the governments should withdraw).

This analysis led to development of organizational frameworks knowledge and skills required from public servants functioning in these new systems.

This process is still continuing and we have still a great need to improve efficiency of the public sector. It now becomes more and more important to add to the priorities of public institutions and their managers one more task – reduction of the democratic deficit.

We can observe a shift in traditional leadership literature. Geert Bouckeart in important work on public leadership identifies components of “renewed public leadership”. From his model of leadership we can infer as to the skills required from administrative leaders. Without going into details it should be noted that at the core are skills increasing transparency and accountability. Professor Bouckeart views (as increasingly many of those writing in this area) that it is the duty of administrative leaders to provide good governance, however absent from his description of the specific content of their tasks is the responsibility – for development of new policies designed to reduce democratic deficit. Good governance cannot be reduced to efficiency and focus on outputs of the existing programs. Since he rightly notes that we are undergoing “rebalancing of power in society” this should call for new or different competencies of the administrative leaders not only in a day-to-day management but also in the area of policy development with policies essential to the overall functioning of the system. Private sector metaphor – you can have the best product and face bankruptcy if nobody buys it is applicable to a state in which nobody has a trust and nobody is willing to participate.

Many reports state that senior civil servants (particularly those managing departments, or agencies) must provide leadership in this process of transformation, attitudinal, and cultural and behavioral changes. Significant work has been done in identifying educational, experience and skill requirements for public servants in general and senior civil servants in particular.

In the United Kingdom MCI (Management Charter Initiative) has developed several competency lists – these are not country or sector specific but are generic descriptions of good managers. Hendry argues that such lists may be used also for the purpose of evaluation and assessment of training needs. To the list of such competencies we have to add leadership in reducing the democratic deficit or in positive terms increasing both trust and citizen participation.

Another dimension (starting with the well known commission of Lord Nolan) is the development of ethical standards for both individuals and institutions in both internal and external relationships of administration. This can be evidenced by the emergence of variety of Codes of Ethics and laws dealing with the conflict of interest. In many systems penalties for breach of ethical standards are very severe including dismissal or even criminal sanctions.

Openness and transparency of administration also became an important part of the changing public sector environment. Such policies have to be effective and seen as such, given the harsh judgment citizens pass on most countries and institutions.

At the same time scientists, demographers and those who write about the future of planet earth although disagreeing about major “illnesses” and possible remedies are generally in agreement that we desperately need

---

24 op. cit. p. 24
long term policies and in major policy fields policies which would be radically different from the present day laws and accompanying programs. Zygmunt Bauman – one of the most prominent postmodernist thinkers while observing rapid globalization claims that we increasingly lose ability to control events. He (and many others) claim that we don’t even have answers to such basic questions as to who benefits from globalization. Data presented in this paper shows some evidence that we are rapidly losing control over our collective institutions.

Boundaries, institutions and loyalties shift in unpredictable directions. Viable national industries are being destroyed in the absence of relevant policies or inadequate policy responses. Globalizing world according to Bauman paradoxically divides people and countries. This globalizing world also contributes to the alienation of citizens from institutions which they feel to be at the best irrelevant and at the worst serving interests other than those of the communities which they are supposed to be serving. We need not only competent managers skilled at managing money and programs but who are capable of engaging citizens in co-governance of public affairs. Democracy has two dimensions one is that of competition between value systems and ideological priorities. That dimension should be the arena on which competing political parties present and implement political programs. Evidence in this paper and the literature indicates that politicians are increasingly losing credibility and support of citizens. Civil services can and should separate themselves from participation in partisan politics. Increasingly we have evidence of politicization of public servants. In many countries there is an evidence of return to the system of “spoils” with the attitudes that “winner takes all”. Public service has an independent role in maintenance and development of democracy. In all democratic nations citizens have a set of rights, which are no longer subject of debate. Development of democracy in such areas occurs through increase in right satisfaction. In all democratic societies there is for example a norm that women should have equal access to work, advancement and equal wages for work of similar value. Yet there is not a single state in which that set of norms is fully met. This is just one example of many in which public servants should act “with all the deliberate speed” in order to close the gap between the normative statements and the social, political and economical reality. Leadership of public servants (particularly those in positions of management) should not be limited to preparation of the next year budget, but creating policies, which will indicate to citizens that the promises of democratic theory are being realized. Citizens don’t expect overnight “miracles”, but can and should expect that the system as a whole moves towards fulfillment of the lofty promises. Democracy desperately needs increase in credibility. Public servants should avoid participation in a propaganda without substance, but concentrate on the delivery of equality of all citizens.