



## The Fairer Scotland Action Plan and Democracy

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In 2016 the Scottish Government produced its *Fairer Scotland Action Plan*<sup>1</sup> which built on a number of Fairer Scotland conversations. This response specifically addresses the Action Plan as it relates to furthering democratic life in Scotland, which was one of its primary objectives. According to the Plan, during the process of consultation which led up to its publication, ‘public involvement in democracy was one of the most talked about issues in the conversation. There was a call for local people to play a part in decisions that affect them and their communities’ (p12). Other aspects to this demand for democratic change include concerns about how public services relate to people’s needs along with access issues, particularly for rural communities.

Whilst it is good to see the Scottish Government engage in this type of constructive consultative exercise and follow it up with specific proposals, the response to the ‘most talked about issue’ is woefully inadequate. The specific sections of the action plan which are relevant to democratic involvement relate to actions 7-9 under the heading of Participation, Dignity and Respect. In summary these actions involve the following:

- **Action 7:** a participatory budget proposal whereby at least 1% of local authority spending is subject to communities to decide on. This will be supported by a £2 million Community Choices Fund so the public can vote on how public money is spent. In addition, the Community Empowerment

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish Government (2016) *Fairer Scotland Action Plan*, Edinburgh: St Andrew’s House.

(Scotland) Act 2015 provides for ‘participation requests’ which will involve discussion on needs meeting, volunteering to support services or even taking over service delivery. The Empowering Communities Fund also provides resources for communities to bid to deliver services they see necessary.

- **Action 8:** this is specifically aimed at enabling people with disabilities to stand for selection/election in the 2017 local government elections. The aim is to contribute to making democratic institutions more representative of the communities they serve.
- **Action 9** is essentially about changing the culture of public services so that dignity and respect are embedded in the everyday practices of public institutions.

Although the last action is to be welcomed because it contributes to individual feelings of self worth, it has nothing to do with enhancing democratic life. Dignity and respect should be central to all forms of public and professional interactions and decision-making with individuals and communities, regardless of whether they are democratic or not. Action 8 is to be welcomed too. Disabled people should be encouraged to stand for selection/election, but so should a wide range of minority groups who are currently under-represented in political life (e.g. ethnic minorities). Without some details about which groups in society are in this situation, it is difficult to judge just how much this measure will contribute to making democratic institutions more socially mixed.

Participatory budgeting (Action 7) is the newest measure to follow from the action plan. We should not quibble too much about the relatively small amounts of money involved; resources are scarce and this might simply be a starting point. Whilst the aspects to this action have potential for extending democratic involvement, they might also achieve the opposite. Communities taking over and delivering services might simply be cheap options and desperate ones as the state withdraws adequate funds for service delivery. In a context of austerity with shrinking budgets voting on how public money is spent might also be recast as voting on how it is cut too. Vulnerable

communities are the potential losers in this process as the services they need can be devalued by plebiscite.

The glaring problem is that the proposals do not follow from any analysis of why people want more democratic opportunities. Why are current experiences of democracy experienced unfairly? There is nothing in the document which touches on this central issue. Without understanding the problem how can the actions address the real issue?

Political inequality is a useful concept for thinking about how democracy is experienced unfairly and how this is rooted in structural problems of inequality<sup>2</sup>. This shifts the problem and solution to a structural analysis of society and its malign consequences for people's everyday experiences of democratic life. Political inequality captures the contradiction that formal politics may be 'equal', but totally undermined by inequalities deriving from structural inequalities of social class, age, geography, amongst other things, when it comes to groups having a genuine influence on political outcomes. The advantage of current democratic arrangements, for the well off, is recognised across the social class spectrum by the financial elite, middle class beneficiaries and working class communities who fail to benefit from them. Without addressing the entrenched nature of political inequality, merely providing local structures for participation might simply benefit those who already benefit from the way the wider system works. But those who are 'left behind' by politics will inevitably find a voice somewhere; the triumph of popularism in the Brexit referendum and the politics of Trump in the US are depressing examples of what happens when political inequality reaches an impasse in the existing system.

One way politically unequal communities can level the situation is through educational experiences that will enable them to identify and articulate their problems and act individually and collectively to promote their interests. Unfortunately,

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<sup>2</sup> Lawrence, M. (2014) *Political Inequality: Why British Democracy Must be Reformed and Revitalised*, IPPR.

education is not mentioned in the action plan. Instead, the potential for community based education is being systematically undermined by a major disconnect between the rhetoric of many state policies which affirm the centrality of community learning and development for policy initiatives, and the reality of a diminished, disappearing and invisible service. How many local authorities in Scotland now have a dedicated community learning and development service? Not many for sure.

Political education is the ‘elephant in the room’ and will not go away. By political education I do not mean socialisation into a political process, or indoctrination into a set of ideas and assumptions. To put it simply, political education involves consideration of ‘means’ and ‘ends’ about the ‘goods’ and ‘bads’ in society and how they are distributed. The 2014 independence referendum ignited a widespread interest in popular forms of political education as people attempted to grapple with the issues and interests involved in deciding how to cast their vote. It also stimulated a response from some community and adult educators who recognised the educational challenge the referendum posed. Since then a number of individuals and agencies including staff from the Universities of Edinburgh, Dundee, Glasgow and Aberdeen, as well as Education Scotland, Learning Link Scotland, the Workers’ Educational Association and the Scottish Community Development Network, have been organising national training events on *Learning for Democracy* to help community practitioners look at how they can contribute to democratic renewal through their professional role. These events have been a start but much more needs to happen.

The educational component of making a fairer Scotland is part of the solution and, without it being explicitly recognised in policy, the experience of a democratic deficit will not disappear. Indeed, the facts of political inequality are likely to ensure that measures like those in the *Fairer Scotland Action Plan* merely benefit those who can take advantage of them rather than those who cannot.