

XX January 2021

Dear Mr President,

With your inaugural heartfelt call to heal America – which moved not only your fellow Americans, but your fellow believers in democracy worldwide – it has served emboldened our view that without a steady supply of oxygen to ensure its survival, there is the very real risk it is extinguished.

From Washington to London and everywhere in the world of democracies, we need leadership and clarity on how we take our democratic system into a sustainable future. I hope you will forgive my temerity in suggesting one practical way to help achieve that.

Democracy is about the reconciliation of views. The deliberate separation of powers and of parties rightly formalises and sets up a permanent structure of conflict. This conflict is then constantly reconciled through a humane and political process. However, we began to take that process for granted and failed to evolve it to be fit for the modern age. Your election gives us a second and possibly final chance to put that right.

All too often, conflict has been the default position of traditional politics when difficult problems have arisen. It is so much easier to relax into your comfort zone and say “no” rather than to engage with political opponents. However, there is a way forward. That is, to upgrade our sometimes threadbare methods by putting to work a new, innovative kid on the democratic block – deliberative democracy.

In brief, the answer is that ahead of any immovable political postures being taken, that you consider engaging citizens themselves using deliberative democracy to express thoughtful, practical answers and recommendations in whatever areas you and/or Congress feel appropriate. We seem often to be rich with brilliant policy solutions but paupers in having effective processes to move them forward. Our citizens have one great quality that legislators can never have: their views would not be forged in the melting, distorting heat of the daily political inferno. Legislators are the quickest to acknowledge this. They understand it is much easier for each party to accept for debate and legislative action the considered views gifted willingly by citizens (or in our case in the UK, subjects) rather than the views of their political opponents.

Deliberative democracy is where a microcosm of a nation – impartially and scientifically selected – request views from experts and are facilitated by independent professionals to conduct mature, respectful democracy. There is now a vast amount of global experience in doing this well and successfully resolving some of the most difficult issues in politics. The most competent and distinguished practitioners of deliberative democracy in the US and across the planet would happily assist in this work at your command. The prize is to take democracy in the United States forward to its next evolution – the meaningful engagement of citizens in support of their elected representatives.

Winston Churchill once said “Democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time”. Even before the Capitol Insurrection, those of us who regardless of political affiliation call ourselves democrats worried about keeping that system viable – the least “worst” it can be. Our global democracy feels fragile and poorly-maintained. If it is to have a strong long-term future, it now needs some serious love and attention. Your promise to reunite America presents the perfect opportunity to do just that.

If we want to renew democracy, then people of good will from all political backgrounds have to work up some persuasive ideas and arguments. Above all, these must remake an effective partnership between a disenchanted public and a political class that often struggles to connect with them. However, in a sometimes depressing picture of national and international democracy, there is a growing glimmer of hope—and oddly it has a pedigree going back to ancient Greece.

The optimism here for democrats of all persuasions is based upon the recognition that elections alone are not enough. Like the ancient Greeks, using **Deliberative Democracy** to re-engage citizens thoughtfully with their politics is an important way to restore trust and participation. This

would not only halt the decline of faith in democracy but also take it to its next evolution, a cultural development as significant and uniting as was “Votes for All”.

It is time to renew our democracy on a sustainable basis led by your example from the top, engaging with elected representatives and making it strong enough to transcend the complacency, elitism and populism that still threatens its very existence. The Executive and Legislature can and must feel supported and energised by the change, not frightened or undermined by it. By agreeing in advance each step of the process, they will be completely confident that deliberation is a welcome improvement for our democracy, not a threatening alternative to it. Citizens and elected representatives can then work together to play our parts as sensible and constructive partners. The Capitol Insurrection and a new President means the moment has come. As Hillel is reputed to have said “If not now, when? If not me, who?”.

So what is Deliberative Democracy? It is tasty and nourishing slow-cooked politics, the antithesis of our present fast food McPolitics. Deliberation is where a microcosm of the nation, region or locality propose recommendations for consideration by legislatures. In essence a group of 80 or so citizens, transparently and scientifically selected, come together to conduct, in the words of Deliberative Democracy guru James Fishkin, “democracy in good conditions”. They are properly looked after, travel costs paid, even a small honorarium of thanks and a decent hotel for however many weekend days it takes them. Perhaps most importantly, citizens don't bring the baggage and prejudices of political parties with them. A point is made to discuss issues respectfully and with good manners with the 7 or 8 people on your table, a mind-opening counterpoint to the bad manners and distortion of political and anti-social media spinners.

The amazing thing is that deliberative democracy is actually working and gaining traction in the US and across the globe. The record shows that the “everyday people” citizen deliberators like us are – with balanced briefing and professional facilitation – perfectly able to take forward issues which are found to be intractable to usual political processes.

“Give us your toughest problem” is the challenge from deliberators. *Scores of democratic deliberations are now underway or successfully completed* for example on abortion in Ireland, nuclear power in South Korea, energy policy in Texas, social care in Northern Ireland, waste recycling in South Australia, the grand debate in France and the UK Parliament's Climate Change Assembly. Finally, deliberators hand their finished gift to their elected representatives to do their part: the consideration, amendment and decision. Hitherto these representatives that we elect have been hamstrung by whips, tribal party loyalties, electoral short-termism, lobbying and campaigning money to the extent that they are often unable to progress issues. I know this first-hand, since I was elected as a Member of the UK Parliament for 30 years.

Hence, far from feeling squeezed out or undermined, representatives actually welcome the new democratic cleanser of deliberation to unblock our often-sclerotic political processes and make citizen-created common ground. They see that renewing a mutually respectful pre-legislative partnership with citizens strengthens them to get the job done that we elected them to do.

The ambition is to go beyond the epic “40 white guys in Philadelphia” model and, using traditional and the latest online techniques, back up our groups of 80 citizens by engaging with *countless numbers of everyday people, founding mothers and fathers in a national conversation on the key issues put before them.*

This independent process means that the initial recommendations will be citizens' proposals, not mine or – with respect, even yours – let alone those of our favourite pressure group or most generous vested interest. They will ultimately be formally handed to our elected representative for the final consideration and decision that their electoral mandate deserves. Through this process, every citizen can feel ownership and involvement in their democracy between elections. Over 2,000 years ago, one of the founders of the first wave of democracy, Pericles, remarked “We are unique in considering the man who takes no part in public affairs not to be apolitical, but useless”. It is now time for all of us to grow from being a spectator to a player on the democratic field that we came so close to losing.

We are right to test and question this new-fangled deliberative democracy, but you will be pleased to discover that much like elections, its rediscovered twin, deliberation is a process adapted from the ancient Greeks. It is not politics like we used to do, it is politics better than we have been doing and that every democratic society worthy of the name should aspire to do.

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