The wisdom of crowds vs the madness of crowds

Colin James to Australasian Study of Parliament Group seminar, Wellington
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"Trust in Parliament in a post-truth world" was the title for Australasian Study of Parliament Group's annual conference in Brisbane in July. It is a pertinent question at a time when populism has been rising in liberal democracies and may rise more.

As David Solomon[1] argued to that conference, Parliaments like ours are in a sense the trustees of democracy and of the people's interests. That voting turnouts have been declining, particularly among younger cohorts, suggests Parliaments like ours are decreasingly seen as living up to that trustee role. If so, liberal democracy is at risk.

That is all the more so if the information the people are getting from and about Parliament is distorted or fragmented – if we are in fact living in a "post-truth" world.

Truth and politics are not symbiotic. There is much truth in politics. But there is also much adaptation of truth to need, desire, ideology and ambition. Parliaments are infused with politics. So truth and Parliaments in liberal democracies are jostling bedfellows.

In a liberal democracy, as in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Parliament is the "speaking place" for and on behalf of citizens. It is citizens' representative in the power structure. It sets society's formal rules and sets penalties for breaking those rules. It is ultimately superior to the Executive.

As the "speaking place" and maker of the rules, Parliament is critical to civic wellbeing. If Parliament falls short, civic wellbeing is damaged.

Our Parliament is representative because it has been impossible to gather all citizens together to make decisions. Parliament filters citizens' views, wishes, prejudices and impulses to enable informed and workable resolutions of citizens' contests of wills. The "crowd" elects representatives to Parliament and Parliament distils the "crowd's" needs and wants and, at its best, resolves them.

In its modern form, this representative democracy is around a century and a-half old. In the preceding era of oligarchic Parliaments only a select elite of property-owners and aristocrats were directly represented. The rest of the population – the "crowd" – at most "consented" and did so passively; "acquiesced" is a better term.

Oligarchy was thought appropriate because the "crowd", the "demos", from which "democracy" is derived, was not to be trusted. A C Grayling, in his recent book, quotes Plato as saying the "demos" was "driven in unruly fashion by emotion, self-interest, prejudice, anger, ignorance and thoughtlessness into rash, cruel, destructive and self-destructive action"[2]. Grayling interprets Plato as calling the demos "a

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[1] David Solomon, "Public Office as/is a Public Trust", 17 July 2018, https://www.aspg.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Solomon-APR-33.1.pdf, accessed 10 September 2018.

[2] A C Grayling, *Democracy and Its Crisis* (Oneworld, 2017), p2. Grayling also quotes, p3, Sir Winston Churchill as saying "the strongest argument against democracy is a few minutes conversation with any voter" because it reveals the ignorance, self-interest, short-termism and prejudice typical of too many voters and satirist H L Mencken's quip: "Democracy is a pathetic belief in the collective wisdom of individual ignorance".

numerous body without a head" ... "too vulnerable to being captured by the emotion of the moment, by the phenomenon of the 'madness of crowds' which panic or anger can prompt, or which demagogues are by definition skilled at arousing and exploiting".[3]

In short, the risk of tyranny was thought greater from democracy than from monarchy or "open oligarchy". Around 2400 years later Lee Kuan Yew, founding and decades-long Prime Minister of Singapore's benign autocracy with parliamentary trappings, echoed Plato: "I do not believe that democracy necessarily leads to development... The exuberance of democracy leads to undisciplined and disorderly conduct."[4] Better to hand over decisions to Lee's technocratic elite.

The term "madness of crowds" comes from Charles Mackay's resonant 1841 book, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*[5], which documents "moral epidemics" such as the tulipmania in Holland in the early seventeenth century and the South Sea Bubble in Britain a century later, to which one might now add events such as the late 1990s tech bubble and the collaterised debt obligations which led to the 2008 global financial crisis – and, currently, wild house prices.

The good news for democracy was that, as the industrial revolution reshaped European and North American economy and society and lifted rising numbers out of poverty, the elites realised direct representation – what might be called "active consent" – could safely be extended to those rising classes and, moreover, had to be if social order and cohesion were to be maintained. The theory that underpinned, or grew out of, this evolution was, Grayling says, "that the ultimate source of authority should lie in democratic assent and that government should be and could be sound and responsible,"[6] New Zealand was in 1893 the first country to take this to its logical conclusion with universal suffrage, including women and indigenous Maori.

To channel the "crowd's" preferences, demands and needs into practical programmes, parties evolved, with programmes and ideologies. Over time Parliaments in liberal democracies, particularly after 1945, came to be dominated by parties of the centre-left and centre-right, alternating in office and operating within informally understood policy boundaries which could be pushed to the left or to the right but within limits. Minority parties outside those boundaries, to the left or right or to the sides, were just that, minorities.

This might be termed the era of bounded rationality. Most of the people most of the time thought the system more or less worked – at least while their material standard of living kept rising and they felt reasonably safe and secure in their identity as one of a

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[3] Grayling, p4.

[4] Joshua Kurlantzik *Democracy in Retreat: The Revolt of the middle Class and the Worldwide Decline of Representative Government* (Yale University Press, 2013, p79, quoted in John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Fourth Revolution. The Global Race to Reinvent the State* (Penguin, 2015), p138.

[5] Charles Mackay, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, Vol 1, 2ed (Office of the National Illustrated Library, London, 1852), as reprinted 1932 by George G Harrap and Company, in the foreword to which Bernard M Baruch, in the aftermath of the 1929 stockmarket crash wrote: "Anyone taken as an individual is tolerably sensible and reasonable – as a member of a crowd, he [*sic*] he at once becomes a blockhead". Baruch went on to talk of "crowd-thinking, which often becomes crowd madness".

[6] Grayling, p5.

people in a nation. There was a high level of trust, the glue that holds liberal democracies together.[7]

Bounded rationality still reigns in this country, where a recent survey found a marked lift since 2016 in trust and confidence in the government, ministers and MPs, thanks probably to the election of a remarkable young woman Prime Minister.[8] But in northern hemisphere liberal democracies, the centre-left/centre-right hegemony has ended and with it bounded rationality. That is because the material standard of living of a growing number of people in those liberal democracies has stalled or fallen or become insecure and/or they feel that migrants and other intrusions from outside such as hyperglobalisation are unstitching the fabric of what they think of as "their" "nation". As a result, they no longer feel represented by, nor do they trust, the centre-left/centre-right cabal. They see these parties as agents of a self-perpetuating, detached elite: the "other", not "us", those who are "there" not "here", to paraphrase David Goodhart.[9]

The vehicles of protest range from the far right to the far left to the oddball (as in Italy) and from parties or movements to demagogues such as Boris Johnson or Donald Trump or fresh-faced saviours such as Emmanuel Macron.[10] In the still new post-1990 democracies of eastern Europe autocracy is on the rise, supported by voting majorities (in part the result of liberals having left for western Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union).[11] Some autocratic regimes in the Middle East have widespread popular backing.[12]

In the established liberal democracies the parties posing as alternatives to the elite appeal more for what they are against than what they purport to be for except where they promise the restoration of "order". Even where old centre-left and centre-right parties seem to be still running the show, as in Britain and the United States, those parties are deeply, possibly existentially, riven: within those parties the moderate liberal-social democratic centre-left and moderate liberal-conservative centre-right, the upholders of liberal democracy, are in eclipse. The May/June issue of *Foreign Affairs* asked on its front cover: "Is Democracy Dying?"[13] Books and articles in this vein are multiplying.

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[7] Francis Fukuyama, *Trust* (Free Press, 1995, Hamish Hamilton, 1995, Penguin, 1996).

[8] Institute for Governance and Policy Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, *Public Trust Survey, March 2018*, issued 12 June 2018. Trust and confidence were much higher among older than younger age groups.

[9] David Goodhart, *The road to somewhere. The populist revolt and the future of politics* (Hurst, 2017). Goodhart used the terms "nowhere" and "somewhere".

[10] I covered these developments (as up to July 2017) in some detail in Colin James, *Unquiet Time. Aotearoa New Zealand in a fast-changing world* (Fraser Books, 2017), pp15ff.

[11] Ivan Krastev, "Eastern Europe's Illiberal Revolution. The Long Road to Democratic Decline", *Foreign Affairs*, May-June 2018, Vol 97, No 3, p54-55.

[12] Yoav Fromer, "From Turkey to Israel to Iran, popular opinion drives the radicalism and instability of governments in the region", *Washington Post*, 31 May 2018. Fromer writes of these countries: "...democracy may be the problem, not the solution. Instead of moderating extremism, the will of the majorities in these countries has been driving it."

[13] "Is Democracy Dying?", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 97 No 3, May/June 2018. Subtitles included "The Big Shift. How American Democracy Fails Its Way to Success", "The Age of Insecurity. Can Democracy Save Itself?", "The End of the Democratic Century. Autocracy's Global Ascendance", "Autocracy with Chinese Characteristics" and "Eastern Europe's Illiberal Revolution".

In short, in liberal democracies the "crowd" is no longer moderated by moderate parties. The "elites" accordingly are agitated.

In his book Grayling charts first the birth and evolution of liberal democracy then its descent into what he sees as failure. His three main reasons for "why representative democracy has failed to deliver on the promise of its design" are: the redirection of the system by those who get control to the interests of their class or party; failure to educate the "demos"; and "interference and manipulation by agencies with partisan interests ... to get the democracy to deliver their preferred outcomes".[14]

Grayling ends on Brexit, condemning the bumbling mishandling by an elitist cabinet of what its toff Prime Minister asserted was an advisory, non-binding referendum. But Grayling's Anglocentricity blinds him from what a quick check with Switzerland or even New Zealand could have taught David Cameron about referendums, notably to do it in stages with opportunity for reflection, which might have resulted in a Remain vote. Anglocentric Grayling wants referendums abolished or at most subjected to a supermajority. He does not see they could be usefully refined.

Grayling's other Anglocentric shortsightedness is to predicate his book on representative democracy as if that is what democracy is. It isn't. Representation is only one channel through which the demos – the "crowd" – can exercise – and moderate – its will.

There have long been, and now there is a growing number of, alternative ways to express opinion, to develop ways of thinking, to assemble and assess evidence, to build coalitions, to work through competing options for action, reach consensus or a majority agreement and mandate action. These have ranged from riots and organised protest, through petitions that attract support from the "crowd", to pressure and interest groups, constitutional conventions and more recently citizens-initiated referendums, citizens assemblies and juries, expert working groups and collaborative governance consensus-seeking by competing interest groups. Some of these are sanctioned by Parliament, some not. That some are not sanctioned highlights a core characteristic of representative democracy: that, apart from periodic elections, it operates only by the "consent" or "acquiescence" of the "crowd" and that consent can be, and occasionally is, withdrawn or made conditional. (The same goes, by the way, for autocracy.)

The turn to populism in northern liberal democracies amounts to at least a partial withdrawal of consent and acquiescence. This has happened before from time to time before in liberal democracies, most tragically in the swing from the Weimar republic to Nazism in the early 1930s. But the latest populist surge has some distinct characteristics.

One is the breadth of reaction across many countries, most recently Sweden which for decades was the liberal-democratic archetype.

The other is the new mechanisms digital technology has made available to the "crowd" and to those who seek to feed on and influence the "crowd". Far more populous "crowds" can be reached and can interact across far greater distances than in the pre-digital era and those connections are made faster than lightning. And the larger the crowd the more irrational its members can be. We are still learning the implications for everyday life of that connectedness. Also, what the "crowds" say

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[14] Grayling, p133.

about themselves and to others can be harvested and processed by artificial intelligence computers – and misused – in ways twentieth-century statisticians and marketers – and crooks – could only dream of.

As a swelling flow of new books[15] underlines, these new technologies have wreaked serious damage on the keeper of "truth", the fourth estate, which provided channels of information to and from the citizens and their representatives and so was a check on Parliament, however imperfect. The new-era robber barons, Facebook, Google, Amazon and other social media, have sucked much of the advertising lifeblood out of traditional media and by doing that have diminished the role of traditional media's fact-seeking journalists. They channel "news" according to their users' clicks, reinforcing preference, prejudice and preconception. They carry bots: automated accounts which autonomously spread messages (astroturfing), amplify allies' messages (propaganda) and dampen opponents' messages (roadblocking). An Illinois University study found a fifth of Twitter messages in the 2016 United States election were generated by such bots.

As a result real news is garbled and the spread of "fake" news is enabled. That is the antithesis of truth and the enemy of trust on which representative democracy depends. It fuels what Jamie Bartlett in *The People vs Tech* calls "hyperpartisan" group loyalty to parties or demagogues or biases.[16] Bartlett sees digital technology as incompatible with democracy and says it is set to destroy democracy if politicians don't bring it under control.

Facebook and the other robber barons also harvest personal data which can then be processed by artificial intelligence to target bots. This can be used by political consultants and their clients – and by hostile governments or crooks, to distort voting, as in the United States presidential election and the Brexit referendum. Add in the hacking of emails and websites and the malign use of digital technology. Representative democracy and its Parliaments face potentially existential threats.

That's the bad news: the fuelling of a fulsome "madness of crowds" with distorted, fabricated and malicious ideas. This is the "post-truth".

Moreover, this digitised world is the one younger people – the 20-somethings and younger – have grown up with. They think differently, cohort by cohort. The under-20s are different from the over-20s and both think differently from the 30-somethings. And the under-10s? Don't ask. Representative democracy is less central to the under-30s' lives, thinking, expectations and hopes than to older cohorts'. Unsurprisingly, voter turnout in elections has declined here and in other democracies (at least where voting is not compulsory).

But there is also good news. The new media and the other threads of the web also can

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[15] Carlos Lazada, in "Can truth survive this president? An honest investigation", *Washington Post*, 13 July 2018, surveys five of this burgeoning range of new books on "truth", "fake news" and the like: Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (MIT Press, 2018), Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D Rich, *Truth Decay. An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life* (Rand, 2018), Amanda Carpenter, *Gaslighting America. Why We Love It When Trump Lies To Us* (Broadside, 2018), Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth. Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump* (Tim Duggan Books, 2018, forthcoming) and Simon Blackburn, *On Truth* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

[16] Jamie Bartlett, *The People vs Tech. How the internet is killing democracy (and how we save it)*, (Penguin 2018), p43. Bartlett notes, p44: "Crowds certainly are wise when it comes to solving technical, non-value-based problems like fixing computer bugs but politics is very different."

and do enable and fuel a "wisdom of crowds". They enable participation in ways that in the past were difficult to organise or not even imaginable. Might those ways of "collective problem solving" deliver for politics what the peer-to-peer commons does in generating Wikipedia entries or what a swarm of brains "hived" (Bartlett's word) by the internet can do in finding solutions to complex digital technology issues, as described by Nigel Shadbolt and Roger Hampson in *The Digital Ape*?[17]

There is "crowd funding" of new business startups, charities and other ventures. In 2016 an iconic beach was rescued into public ownership through a website which the "crowd" could join and contribute funds to. Pressure groups which used to organise through in-person meetings now operate digitally, as, for example, two justice reform groups, JustSpeak and People Against Prisons. Informal movements can be much more easily generated, as in the overthrow of the Egyptian regime in 2011 or the @MeToo movement exposing sexual harassment. The misnamed "Arab spring" was transitory. We have yet to see whether #MeToo evolves into a durable, influential political force. But they do appear to be pointing to the development, however unevenly, of alternative ways of doing democracy.

I term this "distributed democracy"[18] by analogy with distributed generation of electricity by householders, small groups, factories and building managers through photovoltaic cells, biofuels, wind micro-turbines and combined generation using processing heat and feeding that back into the grid. Shadbolt and Hampson call it "liquid" or "delegative democracy".[19]

The good news for Parliaments is twofold. First, even with distributed electricity generation the need persists for big generators and a grid. Likewise, for as long as there are sovereign national states, maintaining social order needs central authority and assignment of power and so a national legislature and government. (I leave aside here the argument that cities will, or may, over time take over much of what states do, which I explored in a talk late last year.[20])

Second, while distributed democracy leaves room for "madness of crowds" it also makes room for "wisdom of crowds" and that wisdom can be superior to leaders' assumed wisdom. That distributed wisdom can apply even in autocracies which claim all wisdom lies in the centre, as, for example, China's emperor, Xi Jinping, does. For any regime to endure it needs to be attentive to the "crowd's" needs, desires, attitudes, moods and currents. The difference is that in democracies the leaders' hold on power is likely to be shorter than in autocracies, so those leaders – and their Parliaments – need to be more attentive and responsive to the "crowd".

So we might say democracy is an interplay, a tension between the "madness of crowds" and the "wisdom of crowds". Both have always been in play. Liberal democracy works well when the "wisdom" prevails over the "madness" as it did in

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[17] Nigel Shadbolt and Roger Hampson, *The Digital Ape* (Scribe, 2018). They describe the evolution of Wikipedia on pp103ff and on p251 the development in 48 hours of a dataset into a comprehensive website pinpointing on maps accident blackspots for cyclists in London.

[18] James, *Unquiet Time*, *op cit*, pp252, 254.

[19] Shadbolt and Hampson, p118.

[20] Colin James, "The Mark Twain syndrome – why cities might rule (sometime)", talk to the Masterton branch of the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs, 29 November 2017, http://www.colinjames.co.nz/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/NZIIA-Masterton-17Nov29.pdf or *New Zealand International Review*, March-April 2018.

liberal democracies during the six decades when the bounded rationality of the centre-right/centre-left hegemony prevailed and with, it stability. But over the past decade or so the "madness of crowds" has been rising, aided by digital technology. This fragments or degrades liberal democracy. Freedom House, which monitors the rise and fall of democracy, reports that 2017 was the twelfth consecutive year of "decline in global freedom", not least in that self-proclaimed bastion of modern democracy, the United States.[21]

Is this surprising? After all, the Vasco da Gama era, the 500-year Euro-American dominance of the global economy and politics, has ended and with it the Euro-American dominance of ideas, in new science and of how to organise societies, their economies and their politics. China, India, both reclaiming their pre-da Gama eminence, along with other emerging centres of power are bidding for leadership in science and societal and political organisation.[22] Sure, the trend of the past 200 years or so has been towards liberal democracy. But the recent lapse noted by Freedom House cannot be assumed to be temporary. Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orban and Recep Erdogan and their devotees have ambitions directly contradictory to liberal democracy.

That's the gloomy trend. But in liberal democracies "madness" has not vanquished "wisdom". The foundations are still sound even if the superstructure needs repairs.

So is there a counter-trend?

Here's a wild idea The monarchies and autocracies which were upended by the revolutions of 1848 across continental Europe quickly re-established their authority. But some undercurrents continued to flow and decades later – in some cases up to a century and a-quarter later – those undercurrents rose to the surface in the form of representative democracies. So were there undercurrents in the 1968 wave of unrest which swept through liberal democracies, Czechoslovakia and in a muted form elsewhere behind the Iron Curtain? And, if so, are there elements of those undercurrents that promise the rescue or redevelopment of liberal democracy? Candidates include peace, individuality combined with communal inter-responsibility, freedom and equality of human rights and even a "new leftism". But even if such undercurrents are flowing, which cohort will bring them to the surface: the 30-somethings or the 20-somethings or the under-20s? And will that be too late to rescue liberal democracy from the growing cancer of the "madness of crowds" and the rising pressure of alternatives such as Xi Jinping's?

It is too early to address, let alone answer those questions. Any answers may rest on too flimsy a hypothesis.

But there is a case for optimism. The Canadian cognitive psychologist and linguist Steven Pinker has presented mountain ranges of evidence that humans across most of the world are treating each other better century by century and decade by decade:

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[21] Michael J Abramowitz, *Democracy in Crisis. Freedom in the world 2018* (Freedom House, 2018). The report said that "since the 12-year global slide began in 2006, 113 countries have seen a net decline, and only 62 have experienced a net improvement." It noted also that "the United States retreated from its traditional role as both a champion and an exemplar of democracy amid an accelerating decline in American political rights and civil liberties."

[22] Robert Kaplan calls this a return to "Marco Polo's world", that is, to the global balance applying before the European expansion that followed Vasco da Gama's explorations: *The Return of Marco Polo's World* (Random House, 2018)

hugely less poverty, hugely less untreatable disease, even less war and homicide (in liberal democracies), underpinned by greater personal freedom and rights.[23] That points not to the triumph of autocracy but towards something that might look more like a descendant or outgrowth of, or migration towards, liberal democracy.

One reason we have become despondent and why large minorities have turned away from liberal democracy is the relentlessly negative tone of the traditional media. We play up the bad, the disgusting, the violent, the worse side of human nature. We think that is what readers/listeners/viewers want. Entertainment trumps information. That negative tone was no better encapsulated than the first words of the New York Times' emailed weekend briefing of May 20 on the royal wedding: "Let's start with some good news for a change."

Pinker overstates his case. But the underlying point, I think. has merit. If so, there is life and value yet in liberal democracies – upsides worth developing, including in the capacity for distributed democracy to build the "wisdom of crowds".

If that is to be so, Parliaments will be critical to building the wisdom and quelling the madness. As the law-making meeting places, the "places to talk", Parliaments can take initiatives that can influence the course of debate, argument and resolution. A quick list for the New Zealand Parliament might go something like this:–

First, stamp out bad behaviour. Question time (despite some innovative attempts at corrective action by Speaker Mallard) is a disgrace, to Parliament and the nation. It is a sufficient reason not to vote or at least not to vote for incumbents. Partisanship cannot be eliminated because politics begets tribes with different ambitions for themselves, their supporters and the country. But airing those differences should be by principled debate, not snide, personalised, denigrating and partisan argument and catcalling.

Second, rework debate in a much strengthened committee structure to get more focus on improving legislation and informing it with disinterested expert, especially scientific, evidence.

Third, help MPs behave more like the responsible representatives they need to be by beefing up resources: good salaries; more administrative support in Parliament and in electorates or, in the case of list MPs, in the area they choose as their base; strong research support, including funded access to private and academic experts and scientists for evidence; and access to departmental advice.

Chris Hipkins' glib dismissal on 6 September of the Appropriations Review Committee report on resourcing MPs[24] as "dead in the water" demeaned Parliament in a way that invites distrust. Hipkins' title, Leader of House, suggests he is the guardian of Parliament but actually he was acting as an officer of the Executive, lording it over MPs and Parliament. For as long as this overlordship persists, Parliament will earn its growing disrepute. Mindless media carping at Simon Bridges doing his proper job going round the country listening and Jacinda Ardern participating in the strategically important South Pacific Forum doesn't help.

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[23] Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now. The case for reason, science, humanism and progress* (Allen Lane, 2018) and before that *The Better Angels of our Nature* (Allen Lane, 2011).

[24] *Towards a World-leading Democracy*, Report of the Seventh Triennial Appropriations Review Committee, 17 August 2018.

Fourth, reduce voter cynicism about who really runs the show (shadowy figures in behind political parties) by greatly increasing public funding of political parties and tightening rules limiting private donations and requiring information on donations to be widely distributed publicly, by way of social media, so people who don't normally engage in politics see who is paying whom.

Fifth, related to that, generously publicly fund something like Radio New Zealand to produce a platform of factual, fact-checked information that other serious media and even social media can draw on. Also, publicly subsidise selected serious media websites, such as Newsroom.

Sixth, related to that, start looking for ways to mandate the curation of social media and hold the curators to account. Obvious mechanisms are tax and regulation but regulators will need to be very nimble, fast and innovative to keep up with changes in technologies, algorithms and platforms. That means competing on price with the tech industry.

Seventh, set up an independent fiscal commission appointed by the whole of Parliament and convert some other commissions into parliamentary commissions similarly appointed. That could include, for example, the Human Rights Commission and the planned Climate Commission, among others. But first rewrite the appointment, dismissal and oversight rules of such commissions to ensure proper, open, just process.

Eighth, adopt the principle of subsidiarity and enable and mandate local councils to take more power and do more.[25] Councils vary greatly in quality but they are closer to their segments of the "crowd". If well-resourced, councils might prove able to develop internet-based ways of engaging and drawing from the "crowd" positively to develop "wise" policies and programmes the "crowd" can see, respect and value as relevant and see that they are not the preserve of a distant elite. Parliament could learn from such experiments and innovations.

So, ninth, following on from that, start to take Parliament and decision-making to the people, through innovative use of digital technology to inform, consult, engage and involve voters in more complex decisions than binary yes-no referendums. That could mean taking collaborative governance, citizens juries and assemblies and deliberative polling much wider than small samples and securing voter responses with blockchain technology to encourage interaction.

How far could that go? Nigel Shadbolt and Roger Hampson muse on "citizen internet panels" and even a "national panel" comprising millions of people. "Decisions that affect a lot of people should involve a lot of people," they say, even suggesting "new legislation, in principle, could be crowd-sourced".[26] Jamie Bartlett offers a long list of aspirational corrective measures, including reining in and fully taxing the digital giants like Google, Facebook, Amazon and Apple and "policing the algorithms".[27]

To a fading baby-boomer like me the Shadbolt-Hampson musings stray into science fiction territory. But in the digital world much that was science fiction 40 or 50 years

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[25] On 15 July Local Government New Zealand and the New Zealand Initiative launched a "localism" project promoting decentralisation. A summit is timed for February 2019.

[26] Shadbolt and Hampson, *Digital Ape*, pp304-5.

[27] Bartlett, *People vs Tech*, pp207ff.

ago is fact now. Why not new ways of doing democracy if the alternative is outdated, outmanoeuvred, outsmarted and illegitimate Parliaments? We in liberal democracies need Parliaments, to focus politics and ideas and execute policies and decisions. But those Parliaments need to be modern – as they learnt they needed to be in the nineteenth century when the aristocracy and upper classes were challenged by the merchant and industrial classes and a new industrial working class.

How all this evolves – and especially whether facts and commonsense, which are the nearest we can get to "truth" in politics, prevail – will be a large factor in the evolution of trust in Parliament.

The fundamental point is that democracy is the property of the demos and the optimist in me says that ultimately the decisions the demos makes rest on the "wisdom of crowds". There is room for optimism that the wisdom of the crowds might yet trump the madness of the crowds.

If so, liberal democracy has a way to go yet.