

*There comes a time
When we heed a certain call
When the world must come together as one*
Michael Jackson

10. Think globally, act locally

On the international movement for democracy on the net

On the web I found an interesting site, »Utopian World Championship,« a contest at the intersection of philosophy, politics and aesthetics on utopian thinking. I wrote an essay called »Demoex – think global, act local« (2004), which I submit to the UWC. The essay deals on the work of Demoex (Democracy Experiment) and will eventually lead to the final. The awards are held at Färgfabriken in Stockholm. I get there and celebrated Cyril Belshaw who became the World Utopian Champion. I receive the second prize: the trilogy *The Principle of Hope* by Ernst Bloch.

Jon Brunberg, a founding member, then invited me to a seminar at the Art Kiasma gallery in Helsinki, where many know Demoex after an article in the newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*. I caught a bad cold, but I still perceive that among the young avant-garde artists, there is a great interest in direct democracy on the web. The avant-garde is usually some years ahead of its time. Until the right time has come, I read *The Principle of Hope* slooowly.

One day, my friend Einar asked if I wanted to help him buy a boat. He has been offered to take over a Nordic Folkboat for a cheap price by an old acquaintance. Einar has never sailed before and I had not had a boat since childhood dinghy. But boating attracts, so we bought »Hulda af Tälje,« a wooden oldtimer.

One sunny Sunday when we put on the mast, three people from England who were doing a film about democracy in various countries in the world visited us. They interviewed me and Einar in the boat when we told them that we had started Demoex to save time. »We are lazy, you know,« I said. »We want to be able to devote time to our

families and hobbies without having to refrain from political influence.«

The British were fascinated, and one of them, Rick Waring, made the far best attempt to launch Demoex elsewhere, on the outskirts of London. Our boat guests helped us to prepare the mast. We have a can of gray-white fatty substance secreted by the sebaceous glands of sheeps to lubricate the notch in the mast. I declare that the sludge is »sheep semen.« Einar corrected the term to »sheep sebum«, and the English fellows looks relaxed. After the mast-stepping, the cameraman followed us to Vallentuna. When he caught sight of Tuna House in the center he said he was surprised. »Vallentuna looks like a small town in East Germany.« We went to the only open restaurant. When the camera started rolling, the village's local alcoholists misunderstood the situation and believed that the filmmaker was making a documentary about their social misery, so the Englishman was about to be knocked down in the utopian, democratic GDR lookalike town.

The interest in Demoex increases abroad. To share our experiences I start blogging in my faulty English in April, 2010. The blog – a failure – soon gets many visitors. After a while, I began to correspond with Paul Nollen from Belgium. Inspired by us Paul started an international network, E2D International. E2D stands for »Electronic Direct Democracy.« He creates a webpage on digital direct democracy at Participedia and Jean-François Frenette from Canada leads us to agree on a common manifesto. Different parties join: Citizens for Direct Democracy in Belgium, Online Party of Canada, Partido the Internet in Spain, Aktiv Demokrati in Sweden, Senator Online in Australia, Svojpoltik in Slovenia, Democratici Diretti in Italy and Online Party of Romania. The movement is growing all the time. So far Demoex is the only elected E2D-party, but there will probably be more.

In the past, I mentioned Wikipedia, a great example of what people can do by working together with common visions and ideas. I would like to see a »Wikimocracy« with the same commitment, but with political issues in all kinds of languages in different countries instead of dictionary words. The site would have referendums at all levels – municipal, regional, state or provincial and federal. People should have the right to vote in the political bodies to which they belong. We could learn a lot from each other because the same questions come up everywhere around the world. How do you solve the problem of transport, waste, health care and crime in other countries and cities? Instead of going on field trips, we could look directly at their debates

and see the arguments behind the decisions.

Pierre Bourdieu writes in his book *On Television* (1999) that TV has had a profound impact on all cultures through its global distribution and accessibility. The range of the TV is controlled by the battle for viewers. Competition leads to all TV channels running the same kind of audience favorites – sports, gossip and game shows. TV would otherwise be a great tool for democracy. The content is controlled by what viewers most want to see. If viewers most of all want to see live coverage of political debates, we will see it. Why not? TV is ideally suited to depict dramatic events. We have to combine utility with pleasure. A political debate related to an important voting can be very dramatic. If we are to engage in the world's destiny then policies need to be as dramatic as the Superbowl show or »American Idol.«

A STARK IDEA

Sometime in the future I would like to experience democracy even at the global level. I know it is controversial, but I would say that the World Citizen idea – the cosmopolitan idea – lies behind the United Nations. The UN has been valuable for peace but maybe not as good as intended from the beginning.

Jim Stark was president in Operation Dismantle the 1980s, a non-profit Canadian organization that wanted to get the two superpowers, the USA and the Soviet Union, to commence mutual, balanced and verifiable nuclear disarmament. Nuclear weapons affect the entire world, and Stark argued that since no one at the national or even international level was able to take hold of the question, we could seek to have local referendums to bring about disarmament agreements. After he convinced a mayor of Canada's capital city, Ottawa, to pass a bylaw permitting a local referendum on the nuclear issue, the matter went to a trial, that they won, Then they built a campaign on the case that spread. In the end more than 200 Canadian cities held referendums, millions of people voted and public opinion in favour of disarmament soared as a result. And that was before the internet.

After reading about the organization Vote World Parliament (VWP), where Jim Stark is currently a co-president, I contacted him. The VWP is a campaign to try to achieve a global democratic referendum – the first of its kind – on the possible establishment of a world parliament. I thought it sounded interesting, so I asked if Demoex could help in any

way. Then Jim got an idea; that we can do the same as they did in the disarmament campaign in the 1980s. Demoex can put a proposal to the City Council to ask the citizens to participate in a local referendum. If the voting is carried out well many municipalities worldwide can vote for the same ballot wording and the results can successively be added together until a majority has voted. The referendum question is worded with great care and the exact ballot wording is:

Do you support the creation of a directly-elected, representative, transparent, and democratic world parliament that is authorized to legislate on global issues?

I am very happy that the word »transparent« is now included in the formulation; it is largely Demoex's merit. We are by no means unanimous in the party, some think it would be dangerous with a world parliament, and there is a fruitful debate.

Lennart

It seems natural to support this proposal. However, I would like to point out the huge resistance that can be expected from large corporations and certain military officers. This is despite an expected support from reputable politicians.

Jerry

The idea is good but how could we unite the world's peoples under a single referendum with so many different conditions, economic and social demands and conditions?

Per

The motion proposes a referendum. Even if you are skeptical to a world parliament, you may think that a referendum is a good method to make decisions, especially if you enjoy Demoex.

Fredrik

If you enjoy Demoex so you like our working methods to gain a hearing. There is a time for everything and in the position we are in now this idea combat rather than exercise our purpose. As all entrepreneurs know the local market is very important. I would rather like to focus on getting better member involvement at home than to fight for a world parliament.

Per

We can probably do both. Think globally and act locally.

Uffe

Anyone who does not believe that the world's people can agree on these issues misses an important point – that the world's population can't defend themselves against others' mistakes. There is a long list with BP, Japanese nuclear power plants, chemical spills in Hungary and more. Something must happen soon.

Fredrik

But how (...) can we ensure transparency?

Per

For me it's obvious that a world parliament must be located on the web. It »only« requires that the world's leading IT security experts are employed.

Fredrik

It is not satisfactory, the security level that is required is impossible to guarantee. We talk about more than IT security here.

Per

In that case the world's stock markets would not dare to use the internet for financial transactions.

(...)

Jerry

I agree that the idea is very good. But the requirements are too big. My theory is that you should proceed in small steps such as currently occurs in the Arab world, which is not perceived as a major threat by the critics. Change takes time. Compare this with how long it took for women to get the right to vote or for the children in the third world to get the right to education.

Per

The proposal is based on the same principle. One small step at a time towards global democracy, from the grassroots and upwards. It will take many years until a global referendum can be held. But the first step must be taken somewhere, and that is what we are voting on.

After the discussion, a small majority within Demoex voted to submit the proposal, but when we presented it in the Vallentuna City Council, the mayor refused to put the item on the agenda and allow council to vote on it. He follows the local government act for the most part but when it suits him he violates it, as now.

When I told Jim Stark of the Mayor's decision and the debate in Demoex I point out that it would have been easier if the word »transparent» is included in the ballot question. Jim agreed, and I proposed the addition of the word to the Board of VWP. Jim thinks we should perhaps try to submit the the proposal again, but asked if the referendum can take place online instead, via the municipal website or the Demoex website. I presented the new proposal and we had another fierce debate in Demoex. The proposal was accepted by the smallest possible margin, and this time the City Council gave us leave to present the motion:

»The proposed resolution suggests that Vallentuna City Council ask all adult citizens (16 years or older) to participate in the online global referendum on the establishment of a democratic world parliament.

A majority of Vallentuna citizens appreciate the benefits of democratic governance at local, regional and national levels. These same people would probably think that democracy would be a better alternative to anarchy on a global scale. Citizens who are in favor of the establishment of a democratic world parliament think it's probably the only way to end all wars, ensure human survival and deal effectively with other supranational issues.

The mandate of a global referendum could be considered legally binding under international law in a situation where at least 50 percent of all adults in the world had voted, and at least 67 percent of them voted »yes.«

All political problems should be dealt with by the smallest appropriate political unit. Issues relating to global security – the protection of the earth and its inhabitants – are not handled satisfactorily by the world's nation-states or regional parliaments. Therefore, the City Council has the legal right to hold a local referendum on the issue.«

I was alone from Demoex when the matter was taken up by the City Council at a meeting on 14 November. My only company was a video camera to document the event. When the time came, I brought my camera up on the podium and said the following:

I begin by quoting the Chinese philosopher Laozi:

»A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.«

You may have noticed that interest in democracy on the net has increased in the world? There are two different global democracy movements on the net: A revolutionary, extra-parliamentary movement that would like to overthrow the representative democracy system, and a political movement that wants to reform democracy by creating broad cooperation between the parties. Demoex belongs to the latter movement, and we have tried to bring you with us, but this effort has not gone well.

As popularly elected in the City Council, one often have the feeling that the important decisions are taken elsewhere. Every day the most important decisions are taken, but never in our council. But now it's time. The most important decision in the world today is not taken the White House, but here in Vallentuna City Council, by us. Therefore it makes sense that we know what we are going to decide. We are to decide whether to implement a municipal referendum on the net – the first of its kind.

There are already many pro arguments in the resolution, but here's one more: The cost for our municipality is virtually zero.

There is only one counter-argument in the mission that is repeated with slight variations: The Executive Office suggests that the resolution is rejected since it is not compatible with the local expertise. Local expertise is not the same as local management expertise. In that case I could understand the reasoning.

»According to the *Constitution* 10 chapters, only the Government and Parliament is to decide on intergovernmental agreements« it says in the notice. Anyone who cannot distinguish between agreement and a referendum should take a course to upgrade their expertise. No, the local competence is regulated by the *Local Government Act*. The *Local Government Act* states in the ninth paragraph that »The council decides on matters of principle nature or otherwise of major importance for the municipality or county, primarily« ... and so we go to item 8 - »a referendum in the municipality.«

The only counter-argument is therefore false, deliberately misleading and invalid.

»Matters of foreign policy fall outside the municipal competence,« it says in the notice. This is not a foreign policy concern. The proposal doesn't suggest that we should leave the EU or attack Norway, it suggests that we should hold a municipal referendum. Only we have the expertise to decide on a referendum in Vallentuna. Other municipalities may follow our example if they want to, but it is outside our remit. We just poke our little dominoes, but it can have a huge domino effect. This proposed resolution has the potential to change the world for the better.

I am not addressing to the parties because I know how parties function by now. I am addressing anyone who is sitting here. What if the parties disappeared by a snap? Then the 41 citizens remain here with the responsibility. We must stop hiding behind our parties.

As you can see I have a camera with me. I'm filming. The camera is completely harmless, at least if you have nothing to hide. I will request a vote on the issue and you will have to live with how you vote. Last time I filmed a vote was in Arkils Tingstad in 2010. If you have not watched the video online, I recommend it. You will notice one thing: The parties are not in the video. They do not stick to the camera. The only things that stick are humans. Lasse and Anne abstained, Niklas, Margret and Ing-Marie think I should have put forward the interpellation, and others who disapprove. All 41 are listed, but no party. We humans who sit here stick to the camera and we are the ones who must take responsibility for what we are voting on now, not our parties. I approve the proposed resolution.

I must have stepped on a Conservative representative's sore toe. He usually never speaks in the council but at this point he asked for a reply, and goes up to the lectern to respond:

Per Norbäck want to make it sound like this is just a local referendum. But what would the referendum be about? It is not trivial: a global referendum on the establishment of a world parliament! Well, everybody (almost) in this room realizes that this is not local politics. This is obviously nothing that this assembly is

to decide on or initiate a referendum on. And Per Norbäck, with a complacency that defies what I come across to date, is lecturing us elected officials as if we were individuals and did not have their own responsibility. But he himself takes certainly responsibility! In contrast to any other, with the odd exception, Per Norbäck takes political responsibility, but the rest of us are voting cattle without our own opinions. What a matchless impudence! I've never seen anything like it. I actually think that you – when you speak the next time – should us to apologize! I urge rejection of the resolution.

I was so shaken that I could not hold the camera steady, but I went all the way up to the podium again and ask: »Why should I apologize because I express my opinion? I respect that you express your opinions without slandering you. I want to change things in the world. That I think of my children and future generations is not to be complacent, it is to care about others. We are not asking the world to vote, the proposal is that we shall vote in Vallentuna – certainly on a global issue – but it affects us. The greenhouse effect and the global economy are issues that affect us. When the world has become global, we have to adopt a counter-strategy, and that is to think globally and act locally,« I say.

Then debate is closed and it was time to vote. You vote first by shouting if you support the proposal or not. The City Council President perceived that the resolution would be denied and he hit the gavel fast on the table before I could ask for a recorded vote. He smiles and says that it is too late. I thought he was joking, because in my speech I said that I intended to ask for a vote. I tried to make him change his mind, but now the chairman followed the regulations very strictly. I hoped to show that political cooperation across the borders is possible after all, but it became another demonstration of power abuse.

...

Imagine a global live broadcast, as Live Aid but on world politics instead of famine. Imagine that world leaders meet to decide on a new binding climate change treaty. There are two proposals: to continue the treaty as we have today and hope for the best and also an ambitious proposal that involve major changes in the coming years. There debate is exciting. The host hands out several warnings and a European prime minister gets expelled for repeated violations of the debate rules. After the debate, the voting begins.

People from all countries are using their e-legitimation and computers to vote. During the hours that voting is in progress the world's top artists makes a show. When the results are compiled, the program managers enters the scene with the golden envelope containing the notice of the voting results, news of which climate treaty the world will follow the next ten years.

Why should we wait another 100 years for the environment to be destroyed? The technology needed to avoid such a calamity already exists. When the gap is widening between our technical possibilities and actual influence as individuals, the discontent grows. But we have democracy. If there are enough people who want to help make decisions on important issues, then so it will be. This leads to the reversal of roles, politicians become advisors to the people. This will make the world better.

Or even better: Imagine that the Earth's total population votes e-democratic »yes« to the UN Human Rights of 1948 as the first world law. After that date the international community would have an entirely new role. The vision is here; just start working.

I think this idea complements Demoex. It shows that there is a connection between the local and the global, that we can use local policy to influence globally. I have no great hopes that it will be easy, but the goal is evident to me. A global, democratic, directly-elected and transparent world parliament is needed if we are to deal with humanity's destiny and make justice.