Globalisation ? What Implications For Democratic Decision Making Essay, Research Paper

`We have seen above

that globalisation is putting pressure on governments to adjust the machinery

of government, in order to improve their capacity to operate in the new

globalised policy environment. But the challenge does not stop there.

Globalisation has implications for the internal balance of power in OECD

countries ? including between levels of government, and between Parliaments and

the Executive ? and between groups of countries. And it is not just affecting

the role of government actors in the policy process. The roles of all policy

players ? interest groups, the media, citizens ? are changing in the face of

internationalisation. There has been little debate about the extent to which

these changing roles and relationships impact upon democratic processes, at

either the national or the international levels. What effects is globalisation

having on democracy? A changing balance of

power and relationships?The internal balance

of power in OECD countries is being affected by globalisation. As noted above,

some sub-national governments are, as a result, seeking direct representation

in international decision-making fora. The rationale behind this is that executive government

is entering into agreements that have serious implications for their given

functions and responsibilities. For example, environmental treaties set limits

on sub-national governments’ capacities to manage local land and resource use.

From the other side,

globalisation is used as an argument for national unity ? that when national

governments speak with one voice, the collective interests of state governments

will be maximised ? as was used in Canada, with respect to the debate on Quebec

separation.(18) In any event, national governments will need to develop ways to

improve co-operation with other levels of government through better

communication and consultation ? so as to reconcile national and sub-national

interests in the global policy environment. Globalisation also has

implications for the relationships between groups of countries. The development

of regional groupings ? such as the European Union, NAFTA and APEC(19)? and

international or multilateral agreements, particularly in the area of trade policy, such as the

World Trade Organisation, demands some thought on its implications for the

international balance of power or "international influence".

Dependency theorists argue that globalisation strengthens strong states at the

expense of small peripheral

players in the global economy.(20) Apart from their stated internal goals,

regional grouping may be one way for countries ? particularly small economies ?

to maximise their influence in global fora. So are regionalism and

multilateralism contradictory or complementary trends? In practice, regionalism

may be a step on the way to multilateralism, and a means to equalise the power

relationships in international decision-making between heterogeneous players.

During the Uruguay Round, the European Union showed the extent to which the

bargaining power of individual member states could be enhanced by collective

action.(21) Is globalisation

enhancing participatory democracy?Citizens are now

informed directly from international sources, particularly via global

television and, more recently, the Internet. It is no longer possible for

governments to censor or control in-flows or out-flows of information. This may

help to build democracy in

traditionally closed countries ? for example, by exposing dirty secrets such as

human rights abuses ? but it also facilitates the entry of what might be

considered undesirable information such as pornography, racist propaganda, or

even instructions on how to

carry out terrorist activities.(22) Information technology has effectively

eliminated the capacity of countries to keep out foreign influences;

"good" or "bad". This increased access

to information has a "democratising effect" ? politicising citizens

and often mobilising them into action ? which in turn has significant

implications for national policy development processes. For example, citizens

can use information about what

neighbouring governments are or are not doing, to challenge or pressure their

own governments. Calls for referenda on EU membership, or fundamental EU

legislation, in some EU countries (especially those without a tradition of

referenda) were inevitably influenced by well-documented events occurring in

neighbouring countries. (go into the activism

as related to globalisation that has occurred) Globalisation allows

people to organise themselves more quickly and effectively across national

borders. Interest groups are increasingly organised internationally and capable

of influencing the policy debate in several countries at the same time. A

prominent example is Greenpeace, the environmental group formed in Canada in

1977, now an international organisation with 40 offices in 30 countries and

annual revenues of $US 130 million and a staff of over 1,000.(23) The recent

Royal Dutch/Shell Brent Spar case illustrates the capacity of such

internationally organised interest groups to mobilise citizens and to create

strategic pressure simultaneously in multiple countries. The 1993 Rio Summit

and the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population Growth are examples of fora where

governments were lobbied both by their own and by foreign interest groups. The

world conference on women in

Beijing bore witness to the same phenomenon. Multi-level pressures on

governments to react ? from national and foreign interest groups and from

foreign governments sometimes wielding to pressure from local interest groups ? are becoming more

common and harder to resist. Even domestic interest

groups collaborate with foreign counterparts. New communications technologies

are allowing groups ? linked by race, religion or conviction ? to overcome the

barriers of physical distance. And because citizens talk to each other,

governments must as well. For example, groups of indigenous people ? such as

New Zealand Maori, Australian Aboriginals and Canadian Indians ? are

increasingly sharing strategies across national borders, putting pressure on

governments to know more about what their

counterparts are doing in response. The global news media

is another important international influence. It increasingly defines international

issues and events, which consequently demand immediate responses from

governments. Images of starving children or massacres, wherever they occur, are projected into

living-rooms around the world, shaping public opinion and demands. Governments

themselves are using the global media to influence global public opinion. It

has been suggested that, while Canada was legally in the wrong in seizing a

Spanish vessel in the recent fishing dispute between the two countries (also

involving the European Union generally), Canada/it won a lot of sympathy by

skilfully handling the surrounding media campaign. Saddam Hussein used the

media strategically during the Gulf War, a strategy that was later described as

"hand-to-hand video combat".(24) International relations

and events are therefore more visible and transparent, have more domestic

policy ramifications, and involve the public more often. Consequently, the

policy process is more complex. But does greater access to information and greater participation

in policy processes by an increasing range of policy actors make those

processes and their outcomes more legitimate, responsive and hence democratic?

Or are policy processes captured by powerful interests with special access to information and its

dissemination? Or adding to the

democratic deficit?While globalisation

and its many manifestations may have enhanced participation in the

international political and policy process, it may be having some contrary

effects on other aspects of the democratic process. Governments may take

policy processes to the international level as a strategy to escape domestic

opposition and to limit the number of players involved in policy. The

"behind-closed-doors" nature of international trade negotiations, for

example, has been noted as being helpful in overcoming protectionist pressures

on the domestic front.(25) Claiming "tied hands" as a result of

international agreements, may be a way for governments to present policies at

home that are ? despite being in the national interest (however defined) ?

unpalatable to certain groups, and therefore politically difficult to

implement. There may, in practice, be an implicit trade-off between efficiency

and democracy. There may also be a

shift of power from elected to non-elected bodies. The tendency to resort to

international decision making (including treaties and international agreements)

seems to be increasing the power of executive government at the expense of parliaments. This is

most clear for members of the European Union, especially as it relates to

European directives and regulations. Unlike the EU Treaties themselves, they

have not been submitted to national parliaments for ratification. These

instruments, which take precedence over national laws, are put into effect

without any involvement by national legislatures. The Maastricht Treaty gave

the European Parliament the power to veto regulations, but the consolidation of

the interests of the diverse citizenries of Europe into one legislative body

raises interesting accountability and responsiveness issues of its own. The

erosion of parliamentary oversight is likely to be a key issue in the democracy

debate in future. Parliaments already appear to be demanding more say in the

international undertakings of their governments. But can parliamentary

oversight be built into international decision making, without adding

significant costs and unnecessary delays? If not, are there new forms of

democratic accountability that could be developed? As more decisions are

taken at the international level, there are also likely to be demands for more

transparency and greater accountability in international fora. Citizens at the

local level will demand to know who is driving the debate at the international

level, and under what authority. These demands apply to both governmental and

non-governmental policy actors. If international interest groups are

influencing the policy debate, then citizens will be keen to know who is in

charge, what their mandate is, and how they are funded. What future for

"global governance"?The impacts of

globalisation on democratic accountability at both the national and

international levels will need to be carefully monitored. Most OECD countries

have taken significant steps recently to improve accountability and openness in

domestic policy-making processes. The same emphasis however, has not been

placed on the development of "world domestic policy"(26) or

"global governance". Global governance can

be loosely defined as the process by which we collectively manage and govern

resources, issues, conflicts and values in a world that is increasingly a

"global neighbourhood".(27) But there is currently no "world

government". What we have is a range of unco-ordinated international

institutions ? the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, the European

Union, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the OECD ? which

manage, set guidelines, or make rules, for better or for worse, in selected

policy areas. Some of them are currently under considerable pressure to reform.

Whatever the future institutional arrangements, democracy, transparency and

openness will need to feature alongside effectiveness as important

considerations in the development of the structures of global governance. Considerations of the

connection between democratic processes and international decisions are just

beginning to surface. The European Union ? perhaps a harbinger for global

governance ? is currently the subject of much national and inter-member debate

on the relative roles, responsibilities and accountability relationships

between the Commission, the Parliament, the Council and Member governments

(including national Parliaments).(28) As in national

decision-making processes, strategies for integrating multiple interests into

policy would also help to improve democracy at the international level.

Questions have been raised recently, even in the OECD context, as to whether

the current arrangements for consultation with labour and business(29) should

be augmented by procedures to consult with other interests such as consumer or

environmental groups. It is important that these procedures be well managed.

There is a danger ? as exists in the national context ? that pressures from

well-organised lobbies will overshadow the needs of the less vocal majority.

This concern has been expressed as special interest groups mushroom in

Brussels. The good news is that

international decision-making fora are surviving in the face of significant

challenges. For example, the recent fisheries dispute in the North Atlantic,

despite being difficult, did not result in withdrawal of either party from the

North-West Atlantic Fisheries Organisation, which currently governs catch

quotas in the region. Rather, it resulted in calls for improved management measures

and dispute-resolution procedures. The new dispute-resolution processes of the

WTO, while as yet untested, offer new capacities for shoring up an

international trade framework that is fragile but beneficial to all parties,

and certainly preferable to unilateral sanctions and reprisals. In other words,

countries must invest more in building effective and legitimate international

organisations that are capable of delivering results, while maintaining

democratic values. A range of procedures are needed including; new negotiation,

mediation, and dispute-resolution; mechanisms for building trust and mutual

confidence between countries; and assessment and revision processes. Building

international institutions that are fair and well respected poses a challenge

to all parties involved in international policy

making. In building mutual

trust, and the other foundations of global governance, national governments

face the challenge of communicating to local populations the extent to which

the domestic and international dimensions of policy are inextricably linked.

They must also prove that sovereignty can actually be enhanced rather than

diminished by active participation in international decision making. But this

in turn will need to be built on the legitimacy and effectiveness of decisions

taken at the international level. A virtuous circle of reinforcement is

therefore imperative. Rising to the

challengeDespite a great deal

of hand-wringing about the challenges posed by globalisation, the process also

offers many opportunities, including the potential to strengthen policy

effectiveness, to tap ideas from other countries, and to have more influence

over the international

decision-making process that inevitably affects us all. But this will require

some adjustment in the structures of government. It will require public-sector

staff to be skilled and competent to work in an international environment. It

will require better co-ordination and strategic direction at the centre of

government. And, most importantly, it will require effort and investment at the

international level to develop and maintain appropriate checks, balances and

democratic quality in the structures and processes of "global

governance". If the above

discussion has raised more questions that it gives answers, then it reflects

the reality. There are no model solutions to these complex issues. Rising to

the challenge of the globalised world is something that all countries will

approach from their own historical, cultural and political-administrative

traditions. What is important is that governments do not bend to pressures to

pull back from an international activity in the vain hope of avoiding the

impacts of globalisation. That would prove to be both counter-productive and

ineffective.