

Social Rationalism; Scotland, my utopia.

Lucas Dixon, KenYerSel

original draft: 25 Oct 2007, updated 2 Jan 2009

There is another way our world can be. It is up to us, together, to walk towards our utopia in the endless distance, our world will become more beautiful with each step. In this short paper I propose the practical philosophy of walking the path of my utopia.

It starts when decision making becomes transparent and accessible, society and the rules and institutions that form it naturally start to be questioned. Indeed, any scientific, inquisitive, or social mind cannot help seeing ways to make the world around them a little better. Society thus becomes a constant slow and careful revolution, an evolution in to a better world. The world of science is a tiny and imperfect model for this, each project is motivated by how it will improve the world, it's methods are slowly and carefully evolved, and decisions are open, transparent and discussed. Scientific discovery gives many different theories about the world; these are stories to guide and help us. We already know that they are all wrong, but the point of science is not *Truth now*, science is about finding stories that make our lives better.

This perspective is a path to a gentle revolution of our world. A scientific and empirical perspective on the administration of society tells us that hard questions need careful reflection and experimentation in order to be answered. Even then, we will not come up with a perfect answer, so such decision making should be a continuous evolving process of trying to do what we think is best. Scientific contribution in specialised areas requires a lot education which, in some sense, makes it unbalanced: in order to even understand what is being presented in a scientific paper, let alone to contribute to scientific development, a strong background in the field is needed. However, administration of society, while sometimes needing careful scientific work, also differs in this respect. In particular, there are three kinds of democratic participation in which everyone has an equal say:

- The first is in the question of deciding what we want. Because we live together, we must find a way to live relatively harmoniously or we will live in perpetual unhappiness. Everyone's happiness is equally important, so we each have an equal right in saying what we want.
- The second kind of contribution is directly to the decisions that are being made. We all know about something and so when decisions about that are made, our advice and input can really help. For example, each person has specialist knowledge of their needs for rubbish collection and the effectiveness or lack of it, in their local area.
- But it is the third form of participation that is the most exciting: everyone can question. Asking questions, investigating what has been suggested, is both educative and helpful. Great insights start with questions, both for the asker and the listener. Everyone should be able to look into how and why we manage society the way we do, and they should be able to ask questions about it and suggest alternatives.

But here we arrive at the crux of the problem, how can everyone contribute to decision making when more than 4 people can not even decide which restaurant to go to? A practical philosophy for group decision making, its study and the development of supporting tools are essential to providing effective and democratic decision making for administering our utopia.

Today's information technology puts us at an incredible and unique point in history, for the first time

since the invention of the idea of democracy, we can pass beyond one of the enormous barriers that were previously thought to be innate in the very concept: we can overcome the narrow bottleneck of democratic participation. We can build systems, and we already have, that allow millions of people to work together on building a better society, on helping take part in a democratic project. This has already happened in the open source movement and has given us the computer systems that run more than half of the internet¹. We can help everyone to help everyone. But this requires more than just fancy IT, it needs changes in the way we make decisions, it needs to be an educative and social process. Making decisions is not about *debates*, it is about building community, reflecting on what we want, what the consequences are of wanting it, and finally about actually doing it. This is not a thing that can be once and for all; we must continuously be considering and reforming our world.

Information technology also gives us a crucial key to tackling another deep-rooted problem in government: human nature. People are not perfect, we make errors, we make bad decisions, we suffer from being corrupt and selfish, and we are sometimes persuaded by mad and poorly thought out arguments. Traditionally this has been a deep and dark problem for government. Politicians become self interested and the natural result is that the common perception of them is as a class of over-paid egomaniacs who control our lives rather than represent our ambitions to improve the world. Being able to manage information, keep a public trace of why decisions are made - the idea of a transparent government - is central to overcoming corruption. The ability to look at the reasons behind the decisions, the debates behind them, helps take away the danger of corruption. The Scottish movement towards participatory, transparent and accountable government is one of the keys to changing self-interested and corrupt *Government* into a careful evolving administration of our utopia. However, the current participation and transparency is just a distant glimmer of what we need. Currently too little of the real information is available: the rationale for decisions is typically missing, and the fragments we have are poorly structured and full of irrelevant information. Participation in decision making is also similarly debilitated. These are hard problems that need technology and knowledge to be tackled. Investigation of ways to share information effectively need to be appropriately funded, tested, and put to real-world, day-to-day use.

In a way, what this proposal amounts to is an anarchistic administration of society by educative reflection. It is 'anarchist' in the sense that asking questions and contributing creates a world that is always changing, always evolving. It is educative because we need to make the process of contribution something from which we learn and develop our minds. In particular, we suggest developing existing techniques in decision making, in analysis and inquiry, in democratic participation, and in IT technology based on democratic collaborative and open source software. We ask for a society based on democratic social reflection, a government based on an open and social form of shared rationality. Our Scotland, our eternally evolving utopia, is in the way we live together, it is in the way we make decisions together.

¹ Linux, Apache, Bugzilla, Wikipedia, Firefox, etc.