

Iceland's crowd-sourced constitution: hope for disillusioned voters everywhere (2016)

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Western democracies are in turmoil. From Brexit to Donald Trump, to a general lack of trust in politics, disillusioned voters are expressing their frustration in strange ways. In Iceland, they are taking a more proactive, hopeful approach – and it's a lesson to the rest of the world. It looks as though a crowd-sourced constitution, developed in 2012, could finally be about to make its way through parliament.

The document – the result of four months of [consultation](#) – was approved by a two-thirds majority in a national referendum but was ultimately rejected by the government of the time. It includes clauses on environmental protection, puts international human rights law and the rights of refugees and migrants front and centre, and proposes redistributing the fruits of Iceland's natural resources – notably fishing.

The [Pirate Party](#) has made getting the constitution through parliament a priority. And a pre-election agreement between five parties to make that happen within two years suggests a strong commitment on almost every side.

As important as the content is how the constitution was produced. The participatory nature of its writing sets it apart from other similar documents. The soul-searching prompted by the [economic crash](#) offered a chance to reassess what Icelandic society stands for and provides the perfect moment to change the way the country operates. This existential reimagining is the heart of the constitution and cannot be underestimated.

The process has been reminiscent of the [Occupy movement](#) that sprang up across the world in 2011. For radical politics, legitimacy comes not simply through single-shot participation, such as through elections, but through a continued involvement in “constitutionalising” – in the processes of rule-making and defining the identity or ethos of a particular community.

In [mainstream politics, constitutions](#) bring social order. They represent the agreement of a single set of principles and associated rules. But once these are decided on, they are often fixed (think of the way the US Constitution is used as an unquestionable governing rule-book and how hard it is to pass amendments). Popular change is often virtually impossible. Elites can even sometimes overrule or ignore constitutional provisions.

This permanence is represented as a robust protection of the rights of the individual. However, the cost is that, in the face of social and political change and entrenched inequality, flexibility is denied.

It is the radically participatory nature of the Icelandic process that makes it interesting to anarchists like us. For anarchists, constitutionalising is not about finding one way to manage all social orders but of finding ways to ensure that people can propose radical change that does not lead to the [domination of others](#). This demands active participation in making the rules by which we would like to be governed.

Constitutionalising does not stop after a certain point, but ought to continue as a fundamental part of social and political activity. The problem with the nation state, potentially with the exception of Iceland, is that it has become ossified. So what might an alternative look like?

Rather than handing collective responsibility to institutions such as parliaments and courts, no matter how well-intentioned, protection is assured via a set of rules to which everyone consents and has a hand in designing.

Across almost all the [Occupy](#) camps, run in large part by anarchists, this continual participation was realised through open forums called General Assemblies. These were shaped almost entirely through consensus decision-making procedures. Rules were agreed that facilitated collective decisions and the people most often left out of these processes in mainstream politics were given a voice.

Participation did not only come through decision making, but also through processes such as “progressive stack”, where the privileged stepped back to give others room to step forward and speak. Safe spaces policies were developed, as well as councils for coordinating the day-to-day running of the camp. This was constitutionalising at its most participatory and radical.

In Iceland the crowd-sourced constitution contains a provision for citizen-led initiatives to propose and alter legislation. So the great promise of this next phase in Iceland’s politics is not simply a social democratic consensus around financial and industrial regulation and human rights, but also an attempt to redress the balance of power between citizens and government. Beyond being given a chance to help write the constitution or to vote every few years, the people are being given the chance to remain constantly involved in the shaping of the rules that govern their society.

This is a vital lesson for any country where people feel disconnected from their institutions of government. What does it mean to “take back control”, as the popular Brexit refrain went? Control from whom? And where? What Iceland and the Occupy movement show us is that the question of who governs is not simply a matter of national sovereignty vs supranational institutions. It runs far, far deeper.

For example, major cities rarely have political autonomy – and the interests of different regions are not adequately represented. Workers and minorities find it hard to make their voices heard.

What Iceland points to might actually be far more radical than simply beefing up the individual’s power to shape policy in a national context, though this is a huge first step. Pushing this a bit further, what if we constitutionalised our cities and regions, workplaces and social organisations? What if we sought to clearly define what we stand for, by showing, through a participatory, non-dominating constitutionalising process, that we are part of the structures of power that shape our life chances?

Iceland is showing the rest of the world that it is possible to ask nearly half a million people how they want to be governed and get a sensible answer. “Taking back control” might be given a radical new meaning if its example were followed.

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