Renewing trust in politics and democracy

RETHINKING SECURITY IN THE 2020s SERIES – *COMMENTARY*
By Julien De Wit – Youth Representative at the BIC

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary democracy is under pressure. Trust in politics is also ebbing away among many citizens. Questioning politics and the state is healthy, but more and more democracy as a concept is being questioned. In this treatise we outline the problem, identify the causes and make a first attempt at possible solutions to restore the bond of trust between citizens and politics.

MIND THE GAP

The march on the Capitol. Washington, 6 January 2021. If one moment in contemporary history has made it clear that democracy in the West was under threat, it was the attack on the Capitol. On 6 January 2021, a crowd of disappointed voters and troublemakers stormed the US Parliament building. The trigger was the non-reelection of incumbent US President Donald J. Trump. The march on the capitol was accompanied by considerable violence. Some even called for Parliament Speaker Pelosi to be executed. Many analysts watched the course of events worrying about the future of democracy.

December 2022. A far-right group is arrested in Germany for planning a coup. The group planned to give the German state system a thorough facelift. They had lost faith in politics and democracy and were then going to work out their own scheme. To do so, they chose the path of violence if necessary. The ultimate goal was to bring a prince to power who was far down the bloodline.

These are two examples of what a breakdown in trust in democracy can lead to. Where democracy is questioned, where democracy is broken with violence breaks out almost every time.

News of a scandal in the European Parliament breaks in late 2022. Orderlies arrest a number of suspects. Among them top politicians. It is said to involve large-scale bribery by Qatar that certain officials within the EU were all too eager to take. Public opinion was scathing. A bruising to Europe's image. An image that was already under fire due to growing Euroscepticism in a multitude of member states.

In this case, political scientists speak of the growing gap between citizens and politics. In Belgium, this concept was first mooted by Guy Verhofstadt in his Citizens' Manifesto, which was a response against the Roman Rouge government at the time, the government of Christian democrats and socialists. The Belgian elections of 24 November 1991 led to a surge. The idea of a gaping chasm was reinforced when Dark Sunday saw the most extensive shift in votes since World War II. The traditional parties - Liberals, Socialists and Christian Democrats - lost votes sharply. Also notable: half a million voters stayed away from the polling booth despite the duty to vote. However, clarion calls and festivities at the party headquarters of the radical-right Vlaams Blok party.

All indicators were on red. Politicians realised something had to be done.

The only observation is that today the gap has still not closed between politics and the citizens it governs. Where trust in politics is under pressure, democracy as a model of state is also questioned in extremis.

WHY THERE IS 'THE GAP'

First, it is worth taking a look at what the reasons and explanations might be for the lack of trust in politics. Note that the reasons I cite in this paper are by no means exhaustive. This is because trust is a very personal and subjective concept. Everyone gives it and takes based on different conditions and premises.

There is no doubt that scandals like the one concerning the European Parliament in early December 2022 do no good to trust in politics. However, the causes of the trust gap are, in my view, more far-reaching than the scandals alone. After all, scandals are of all times.

One might ask whether "the gap" is not also of all times. Political senior writer Ivan De Vadder writes in his book '*Wanhoop in de Wetstraat*' that we should also ask ourselves whether the gap is a bad thing. Is it not normal that there is a gap between those who have power and those who do not. There is certainly something to be said for a certain distance. After all, a manager is also at a certain distance from his

employees. A rector of a university also stands at a certain distance from the student. The crucial thing, of course, is that the person in power is accountable to the person in power. That the power-subordinate can trust that what he asks of the power-subordinate will be answered in all honesty. The subordinate also expects a certain transparency. He wants to understand the how and why of a decision. It is there, however, that things go wrong.

In addition, we can name the proximity and interconnectedness of government as another reason for the breach of trust. To be clear, government proximity is a good thing. However, in recent centuries, Western governments have started to get more and more involved in all sorts of extra things. Historians speak of the evolution from night Watchman state to social welfare state. The more the government takes on tasks, the closer it gets to the citizen. This also makes citizens feel and undergo government decisions closely. When the government makes a decision that is unfavorable to the citizen, it will hit harder precisely because the government is so close. When the government fails, citizens will judge it firmly. After all, psychology teaches us that breaches of trust with persons and entities close to us leave more impact.

Moreover, the fact that governments perform so many tasks also create high expectations on the part of citizens. And high expectations are usually accompanied by big disappointments.

Another reason may be that today, more than ever, people are living in uncertainty. Crisis after crisis befall the Western world. The financial - economic crisis of 2008, the recession afterwards, covid, the Russian's war in Ukraine... These are all factors of uncertainty that do not feel nice. People are less at ease and look for a foothold in their uncertainty. Traditionally, politics has been that foothold, but politicians too are subject to lingering uncertainty. After all, governing in crisis always involves some risk and during such a period, tempers are already at boiling point among many.

A third point to be made, is that this uncertainty and distrust in politics is very much fueled by fake news and half-truths that can spread at lightning speed through the Internet.

Fourth, the existence of any deeper reason for declining trust in politics and democracy is also worth investigating. What if the cause for uneasiness toward politics and democracy lies even deeper? University of Antwerp political scientist Stefaan Walgrave said in a book presentation that representativeness and the representative model of representation may be under pressure. Perhaps we can go even further in this.

Perhaps we can also ask ourselves whether this supposed crisis of representativeness is not due to a crisis of community thinking. We are thinking more and more at the individual level and much less about our group characteristics. The well-being of the individual takes precedence over collectivity in today's giving of time. Especially when that collectivity is called "the state". This is in contrast to China, where the individual comfortably sacrifices well-being for the good of the collectivity, according to Pascal Coppens in his book "Can we trust China".

This lack of community thinking is also a stumbling block for representative democracy. After all, if in an individualistic *zeitgeist* such as ours one gradually loses any sense of community, is it even possible to be represented by someone? Are we not - through the lens of the current *zeitgeist* - all so unique that we no longer tolerate representation?

'Which Member of Parliament can represent my unique person,' we then ask ourselves.

That representativeness may be called into question many times in the future. I dare to state this as I can develop a number of arguments for this. First, there is the demographic argument. More and more people are populating the world. More and more individuals with their own peculiarities. That in combination with a very individualistic *zeitgeist* ensures that a population in contemporary terms is a sum of individuals rather than a collective story to which individuals subscribe.

Secondly, this demographic evolution is also not parallel. In proportion, there will be relatively fewer Europeans in the future than there are today. Combined with a very globalist world, this ensures that our Western society may well become hyper-diverse. That also makes representing "the people" more difficult. After all, what is 'the people'? My third argument is that the gap between rich and poor is also growing, creating a strong sense of us-versus-them. This too undermines representative representation.

OVERCOMING 'THE GAP'

First, it should be absolutely clear that this paragraph in the paper is only an outline of what needs to be done to restore the relationship between power holder and power subject. There is no holy grail of trust that lies somewhere to be found. Anyone who asserts that is erring. However, there are some steps we can take toward reestablishing that trust relationship between citizen and politics and between citizen and the democratic state system. Let it be clear that it is absolutely necessary to improve those relationships. To paraphrase Churchill, democracy is the

best form of government yet discovered. The danger is that in a welfare state, we risk forgetting the fruits of democracy. We are all too quick to take the rights and freedoms that come with democracy (free speech, freedom of movement and the like) as acquired. Here are some suggestions.

1. Join the fight against fake news. Not only inform citizens, but actively involve them in reporting. Provide them with facts and sources and demonstrate how you reach certain conclusions. That way you don't present them with a *fait accompli*, but involve them in the news-making process.

2. Offer as much transparency to citizens as possible. Better to have too much than too little. Explain the reasoning behind political considerations and do not engage in window dressing. Authenticity, according to research, is key in determining whether or not you trust a politician.

3. Install citizen participation. Ensure that such participation not only happens smoothly, but also act on its results. When a decision is made as a government to deviate, explain why.

4. Create more transparency regarding state finances, government operating expenses and spending of tax money. This can easily be done through simplified opening up of databases on these matters. An example is a database that allows citizens to see the various subsidies that have been distributed.

5. Let not only politicians, but political parties be accountable to citizens.

6. Commit to digital democracy. With the digital applications available today, you can involve citizens more extensively in policymaking. However, as policy makers, always be aware that the entire population is still not digitally literate.

7. Commit to countering foreign interference in political elections.

CONCLUSION

That democracy is under attack is worrying, but as is the case in any interpersonal relationship, the relationship between power holder and power subordinate can also be restored. This commentary provided an impetus to think about how we give the citizen back their place in the democratic state system. Today's citizens are increasingly aware of their voice in the world. They are making themselves heard more and for democracy that is a good thing.

At the same time, that citizen often feels that they are not heard, or at least misunderstood. This is one of the first chisms that needs to be overcome if we want to talk about rebuilding trust.

Sources :

This paper was written after consultation of following research:

- Alonso, S., Keane, J., & Merkel, W. (Eds.). (2011). *The future of representative democracy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bobbio, N. (1984). The future of democracy. *Telos*, *1984*(61), 3-16.
- Burnell, P. (2008). From evaluating democracy assistance to appraising democracy promotion. *Political studies*, *56*(2), 414-434.
- Carothers, T. (2010). *Critical mission: Essays on democracy promotion*. Brookings Institution Press.
- Coppens, P. (2022). *Can We trust China*, Pascal Coppens Publishing.
- Dahl, R. A. (1967). The city in the future of democracy. *American Political Science Review*, *61*(4), 953-970.
- De Vadder, I. (2022*). Wanhoop in de Wetstraat*. Ertsberg.
- Elchardus, M. (2021). *Reset*, Ertsberg.
- Friedman, J. (1992). The past in the future: history and the politics of identity. *American anthropologist*, *94*(4), 837-859.
- Galford, R. M., & Drapeau, A. S. (2003). *The trusted leader*. Simon and Schuster.
- Giddens, A. (1994). *Beyond left and right: The future of radical politics*. Stanford University Press.
- Glaser, J. E. (2016). *Conversational intelligence: How great leaders build trust and get extraordinary results*. Routledge.
- Ishkanian, A. (2007). Democracy promotion and civil society. *Global civil society 2007/8: communicative power and democracy*, 58-85.
- Lewicki, R. J., & Brinsfield, C. (2017). Trust repair. *Annual review of organizational psychology and organizational behavior*, 4, 287-313.
- McFaul, M. (2004). Democracy promotion as a world value. *The Washington Quarterly*, *28*(1), 147-163.
- Schlesinger Jr, A. (1997). Has democracy a future. *Foreign Aff.*, *76*, 2.
- Tzin, S. T. (2011). *A Future for Democracy*. W. Hofmeister (Ed.). Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.
- Young, R. (2001). European Union democracy promotion policies: ten years on. *European Foreign Affairs Review*, *6*(3).

About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

Rethinking Security in the 2020s Series

This project takes critical aim at yesterday's approaches to security and defence, with a view towards developing proactive solutions to the evolving nature of insecurity and hybrid warfare. The series has three overarching themes, namely "New Geopolitical Landscape in the MENA Region", "Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention" and "Transnational Challenges to Water and Energy"

Author

Julien De Wit | Youth Representative at the BIC