Chapter two

Revitalising Representative Democracy

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1. Introduction

In all countries represented in this book, local democracy is shaped in accordance with the model of representative democracy (John 2001; Batley and Stoker 1991). Yet, most examples of reform in local democracies do not focus on reforming the existing representative democratic system itself. Rather, they seem to aim at enriching democratic practice with the introduction of new techniques and approaches inspired by other concepts like direct, discursive or participatory democracy3, following the movement from “local government” to “local governance” observable throughout Europe (John 2001). Of course one should not overstate this point. Some cities do experiment with strategies that can directly be linked to representative democracy4. Yet, the most mentioned examples of local democratic reform do not focus on the representative system. It looks as if the main source of inspiration for democratic reform is nowadays found outside the classical model of representation. In this chapter we deal with the question whether the model of representative democracy can still inspire democratic practice.

The classical model of representative democracy (Pitkin 1969) can be depicted as a system based on a division of labour between citizens and elected representa-

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3 See chapter 1.

4 For example Genk, Grenoble and Stockholm (as observed in 2000), in: Daemen and Schaap, 2000, pp. 111-128, pp. 129-144 and 37-56.
tives. These elected officials, acting on behalf of the citizens and organised in a representative body (the council), are the highest decision makers in the system (the legislative power) and supervise the performance of the executive body (the government).

The interpretation of the concept of representation may vary (Converse and Pierce 1986: 490-530). To some representation means “to make the citizen present” in the formal decision making arena (representation of the electorate), where others mainly refer to the political programmes on which the representative is elected (representation of political views). Whatever position one chooses: the role of the citizen is that of a voter, who transfers his ‘sovereignty’, to an elected body, acting on his behalf as the highest decision-maker. In order to make this system function, some conditions have to be fulfilled (this is not meant as an exhaustive list): (1) the voter has to decide which person or persons can best represent him or her; (2) the representative has to represent his/her voters and (3) the representative needs to have real decision-making power.

There is a large amount of academic literature that illustrates why these conditions will never be fulfilled in a perfect way. Chapter 1 has covered this and we will not rehash this here. In addition to this academic work, modern democratic practice also contributes to the criticism of representative democracy. Politicians, journalists and other opinion leaders complain about the decreasing electoral turn out, decreasing party membership and loss of respect for, or trust in the elected bodies. These developments, common to almost all existing representative systems, suggest that the electoral process and the political party are loosing legitimacy, credibility and relevance.

So, this is our puzzle: While our systems of democracy are constructed around the idea of representation and our constitutions and institutions are developed on that basis, most reform projects seem inspired by alternative approaches to democracy, like discursive and participatory democracy, or even direct democracy. Even more: many of these reform projects are actually motivated with references to the weaknesses of the representative system! This leaves us with the puzzle about the relevance of the idea of representation. In order to further explore this, we will present in this chapter some examples of efforts to innovate the representative democracy at local level.

5 In chapter 3, Edwards will analyse the tension between these new forms of democracy and the classical representative model.