If the politicians can't find a solution, let the citizens. That's the call of a group of Belgian intellectuals and activists. They have a detailed proposal: the G1000, a meeting in Brussels on 11 November 2011. One thousand randomly selected Belgian citizens will be given an opportunity to discuss, in all freedom, the future of their country. "Because democracy is so much more than citizens who vote and politicians who negotiate."

More than a year ago the citizens of Belgium elected the people they wanted to be governed by. They waited a year – in hope, in despair, with shame, with humour, and above all with great patience. There was no government. Clearly the challenges that Belgium currently faces are too big to be dealt with by the normal procedures of party politics. That’s okay; fortunately democracy is more than merely a matter of political parties.

If the politicians do not manage to find a solution, let the citizens deliberate. The latter may not have the same expertise as the former, but they have more freedom. And in this context that is a huge advantage. Ordinary citizens, unlike politicians, do not have to find a balance between national interests and electoral strategies. Ordinary citizens do not constantly need to ask: will I be rewarded or punished? Will my opponent be able to score on this issue, or not? Ordinary citizens do not need to be elected or re-elected. That is an invaluable asset. Expertise is something you can gain, but freedom is something you either have or you don’t. Citizens are therefore in a better position to make impartial choices.

After months of thinking, the signatories of this manifesto have figured out a concrete model for giving new impetus to the process of overcoming the stalemate that has plagued Belgium for many years: the G1000, a summit of one thousand randomly selected citizens. It relies on recent scientific research, relevant examples from abroad and new technologies.

The G1000 wants to revive democracy in Belgium.
Our analysis

A radically democratic alternative to the current situation requires first and foremost a new perspective on the current conflict.

1. The Belgian crisis is not just a crisis for Belgium; the current standstill is by no means simply a matter of tensions between linguistic communities. There’s more to it than that. The Belgian crisis is also a crisis of democracy. With its interminable period of government formation, Belgium is not lagging behind other western countries; on the contrary, it is one of the first countries where the general crisis of democracy crisis is clearly manifest. In the Netherlands and Britain, too, government formation has recently been more difficult than ever before.

2. In a democracy, citizens choose to govern themselves. They either do this directly (as in ancient Athens) or indirectly. In a pure, direct democracy, everyone is closely involved in the political process at all times. The system allows for a great deal of participation and works well for smaller units, providing the matters at hand are relatively simple. However modern states are far larger and more complex than the Greek city-states. Since not everyone can or wants to deal with governing, the public chooses, once every few years, a handful of individuals to do so on their behalf. This ritual is called elections and those who are elected serve as representatives of the people. They form the parliament, which in turn appoints an executive that respects the balance of power: the government. The direct democracy of yesteryear has given way to indirect, representative democracy: democracy as delegation.

3. Ever since the inception of the nation in 1830, with the exception of the war years, Belgium has been a representative democracy. The first elections were held in 1831. Since then, there have been nearly seventy elections. Representative democracy has worked well for nearly two centuries. It was a method aiming at the right balance between giving the people a voice and making government work effectively.

4. Today, however, we are encountering the limits of representative democracy. Elections no longer enable governments to work; instead they seem to have become an obstacle to good governance. Political parties, created to streamline the diverse interests in society, now have each other in a permanent stranglehold. Politicians are like what’s called a rat king, a nest of young rats whose tails are so intertwined that any attempt to pull free tightens the knot still further. A rat king doesn’t live long: the animals, which cannot coordinate their actions (each one pulls in its own direction), die of hunger. Representative democracy, the system that was once so fresh, has become a low-oxygen environment. No wonder the country can’t breathe.

5. How could this be? Something has fundamentally changed in the world we live in. It was much easier being an elected representative in 1911 than in 2011. Whoever was elected in 1911 could, for four years or so, make themselves comfortable in the parliamentary environment. Between elections, he (it would not have been a she) was occasionally reminded of his electoral promises through newspaper articles or letters from citizens, but otherwise could go about undisturbed doing exactly what it was he was elected to do: discuss policies, make laws and supervise the running of society. And when elections approached, he could count on a high level of party loyalty among his voters.
6. What a difference today! Nowadays, the elected (female) politician can no longer hide from sight in an area reserved for power-holders; instead she has to expose herself to as much media attention as possible. She must remain permanently in the public sphere, where she can be questioned, attacked and criticized, after which she’ll be faced with online forums where she’ll be reviled, mocked, spat at, praised, worshipped and shot down. Gone are the noble ambitions. Politics has become a higher form of restlessness and politicians have to work like dogs. The reason is simple: elections occur more frequently than before. What’s more, the voter is much more assertive and critical. Bye-bye to party loyalty. The restlessness is partly the politician’s own fault: in order to win a seat in federal parliament she had to win votes in the regional elections. She knows she has made promises that sounded good during the campaign but that are difficult to keep afterwards. No wonder there are tensions. She knows that her constituents have been the dogs who pulled her sledge to where she is now, and that they won’t hesitate to tear her to pieces if they don’t get fed.

7. To sum it up: in 1911 politicians were in power, in 2011 they’re afraid. The former enjoyed a permanent state of post-election equanimity, the latter experience permanent pre-election neurosis.

8. What also hasn’t helped is the disappearance of traditional civil society. Unions, mutual insurance funds and cooperatives once mediated between the masses and those in power. They organizations knew how to package the multitude of citizens’ voices and translate them into policy suggestions. Conversely, they could persuade their members of the benefits of the hard-won compromises they made with the holders of power. This system had many drawbacks, but it did structure the tumult. Many of these civil society organizations still exist, but they hardly have an impact on linguistic community issues. Their members are now increasingly seen merely as clients.

9. And then there are the many technological developments. The arrival of a much more interactive Internet – Web 2.0 – at the beginning of the twenty-first century changed things hugely. In the past, attentive citizens could only voice their opinions on a political initiative through isolated actions (a reader’s letter, a demonstration, a strike); now they can show their dislike permanently and in an unlimited and unfiltered way. At the end of 2006, Time Magazine nominated “you” the person of the year. What we did on the Internet was no longer merely to freely consult texts created by other people; we started contributing to the creation of entirely new texts. Millions of people helped to develop Wikipedia, YouTube, MySpace, Linux and Firefox. In late 2006 Time honoured us for this achievement, in mid-2007 the Belgian crisis began. That was no accident. The Belgian public has never been more rapidly informed about political developments than today. Every second we can follow and comment on the complications, but only once every four years can we vote. Is it a surprise, then, that online forums are full of opinionated and frustrated comments? The occasional aggressiveness doesn’t necessarily reveal a coarsening of public morality, but often the desire of the citizen to be heard.

10. Never before have citizens been so articulate, yet so powerless. Never before have politicians been so visible, yet so desperate. Should we find it unremarkable that we live in an information age with an electoral system that has remained essentially unaltered since the early nineteenth century?
11. Representative democracy – our system of elections, parties and parliaments – has reached its limits. In the heyday of pillarization [the organization of society into separate political and confessional “pillars” or interest groups – ed.], negotiators retreated to spacious private properties (Val Duchesse, Egmont, Bouillon) to conduct their discussions. During the “purple coalition” between 1999 and 2007, politicians experimented with the new political culture of public deliberation, which increasingly led to public fights. But in the current era of exaggerated focus on media they go one step further: politicians talk constantly to reporters, either off or on the record, or with their Facebook friends, their Twitter followers, with their faithful voters, their future constituents, with swing voters (almost everyone), but, strangely enough, not with each other. How many months now have they not sat together around the negotiation table?

12. Ecce homo: political power-holders in the year 2011 look alarmingly like a team of cardiac surgeons performing an extremely delicate operation in the very middle of a chock-full football stadium. Crowds cheer, fans run onto the field and, with every movement of one of the cardiologists, they shout their opinions about what the doctors should or should not do, and sometimes ridicule them entirely. The surgeons are afraid to move. They fear they will be shot down, they fear the people, fear each other. Everyone waits. The clock is ticking; the health of the patient doesn’t count.

13. Democracy has become the tyranny of elections.

An alternative

But things can be different. Democracy is a living organism. Its forms aren’t fixed, but grow according to the needs of the age. Direct democracy perfect suited the era of oratory. Representative democracy was a good solution at the time of the printed word, the newspaper, and later other “one-way media” such as radio, television and the first phase of the Internet. But in the era of Web 2.0, the era of permanent interactivity, we still haven’t found a new and more appropriate form of democracy. All we know is that it is in urgent need of renovation.

1. Innovation is everywhere, except in democracy. Companies must innovate, scientists must cross boundaries, athletes must break records and artists must reinvent themselves. But when it comes to the organization of society, we are clearly still happy with the procedures of 1830. (Granted, voting rights have been extended to workers, women, and non-Belgian residents, but representative democracy itself has remained unchanged.) But why should we be obliged to stick to a formula that is almost two centuries old? If democracy is no longer facilitated by elections, or even hindered by it, then citizens should help find democratic alternatives.

2. Look at the music industry. Its death has been proclaimed repeatedly over the last century. Radio would mean the end of music. Then it was the phonograph. Or maybe not. Then the tape recorder! The CD! The mp3! All fatal stabs, as it were. But if we are still listening to recorded music today, it’s because the industry has reinvented itself time and again. This holds a lesson for democracy: what was once the score for the music industry is the ballot for democracy. It is useful, but not enough.

3. A democracy that doesn’t renew itself will be doomed. A democracy that takes itself
seriously should invest in much-needed research and development. It can be done outside, as well through, existing parties.

4. This is far from simply a Belgian problem. The British political scientist John Keane has studied democracies worldwide and announced “the birth of a new kind of democracy, a form of ‘post-representative’ democracy that is radically different from the parliamentary and representative democracies in earlier times.” Around the world he sees forms of citizen participation and ownership that “pause and silence the monologues of parties, politicians and parliaments.”

5. In recent years, various western countries have experimented with different forms of deliberative democracy. In a deliberative democracy, citizens are invited to participate actively in discussions about the future of their society. In Canada, the states of British Columbia and Ontario wanted to reform their electoral laws. This couldn’t be done through traditional politics: the system as it functioned gave a great deal of power to one of the two major parties (a system comparable to the first-past-the-post system in the UK), and it was clear that neither party would vote for a reform that could potentially run against their own interests. So the citizens were called in. In Ontario, a random sample brought together 104 people from all walks of life (and 158 in British Columbia). The group was balanced in terms of gender, age, education, income and origin. The participants were thoroughly briefed on the electoral law. Over the course of several meetings they built up their own expertise, asked questions, explored various models and deliberated over alternative electoral systems. Not bound by party interests, they could make more rational choices than professional politicians.

6. Public forums, citizens’ assemblies and citizens’ panels have been organized in other countries, always with the intention of launching a debate between people of diverging views. Often they have led to deeper insights and calmer decisions. Since 1986, Denmark has a Council for Technology that allows people to have a say on all developments in the field of genetics, brain research, climate change and biodiversity. Since 1995, an initiative in the US called the Peaks Inn has given over 160 000 people an opportunity to speak on public matters. When the City of New York wanted to redevelop the site at Ground Zero, it first gathered one thousand New Yorkers to talk about it. Since 2002, France has the Commission Nationale du Délégat Public, the main consulting body for dealing with matters of infrastructure and sustainable development. In recent years, the European Union has regularly encouraged the organization of civic participation events to explore complex issues, amongst them the Meeting of Minds (2006), Tomorrow’s Europe (2007) and EuroPolis (2009). Last year, Power2010, a deliberative meeting on the functioning of democracy, took place in the UK. And in 2011 Iceland entrusted a group of citizens with the task of writing a new constitution.

7. The American researchers James Fishkin and Robert Luskin have convincingly demonstrated that people who are given a chance to talk to each other and who can rely on sufficient information are capable of finding a rational compromise in a relatively short time. This has even worked in deeply divided societies like Northern Ireland! Catholics and Protestants who talked more about than to each other have now managed to find solutions in very sensitive fields such as education.

8. As yet, the Belgian government has no tradition of deliberative democracy. For the last
fifty years, politicians have been so preoccupied with state reform that they have forgotten all about the reform of democracy. However deliberative democracy offers useful methods for overcoming the limits of representative democracy. It doesn’t ignore the work of parliaments and parties; rather it seeks to complement it. Just as in a system of direct democracy, it aims at the large involvement of ordinary citizens, but through its careful sampling of diverse groups it also respects the spirit of representative democracy. The formula differs fundamentally from a referendum or plebiscite, because these systems require everyone to vote on a subject that few people really know well. In a deliberative democracy, a few people are asked to discuss something they are thoroughly informed about. The results are usually more sensible and mature.

9. Deliberative democracy could well be the democracy of the future. It is a perfect match for the era of user-generated content and Web 2.0. It harnesses the wisdom of the crowd. It’s the Wikipedia of politics. It realizes that not all knowledge about the future of a society must come from the top. The reason for that is simple: there is no top anymore. There are different branches of knowledge. A society is a network. The masses today may know more than the elites. Debate is the heart of democracy. When people talk, they can more easily align their own private interests with the public interest. The voice of the many can thus help to enrich the decisions of the few.

**G1000, the citizens’ summit**

So, if we bring together 1000 Belgian citizens for a full day in Brussels in order to discuss the major challenges of our democracy;

– And if we find a way to ensure that the composition of this group mirrors the composition of the national population;

– And if we put one hundred tables of ten people in a conference hall in front of a centrally placed stage;

– And if, on that stage, the big issues of our time are comprehensively explained and the various policy options analysed as objectively as possible;

– And if, around those tables, various options are discussed, under the guidance of expert facilitators who give everyone a chance to speak, whatever their educational background, rhetorical talent or level of expertise;

– And if we listen to what all these ordinary, free citizens have to say about their country;

– And if, after these consultations, we vote on the various policy options and brainstorm how to improve things;

– And if we can map the preparedness of ordinary citizens to reach a compromise – before, during and after the deliberation;

– And if, as citizens of a country in crisis, were able to realize this large-scale experiment in democratic renewal...
Would we not then be able to inspire and advise official negotiators on what the people of this country want and what they think is an acceptable compromise?

And would it not be easier for the political representatives to explain a compromise to the people if it was the people who had first suggested that same compromise?

Obviously, the decisions and recommendations of the G1000 cannot be binding, and that’s a good thing – as a citizens initiative we do not want a formal mandate; we want to retain maximum freedom. But they will provide a meaningful framework for further negotiations. The G1000 is an interface between the masses and the power-holders; it wants to show how democracy in this country can be improved – just as informally as the G20, the group of the twenty richest industrial countries, and just as committed as the G20 to the future, but much more democratic. Where it is not those in power who speak, but those who are free.

The G1000 is designed as a three-stage plan. Prior to the citizens’ summit, we conducted a large-scale online survey to find out what it is that citizens are really concerned about. What problems do we find the most pressing? What worries us? This first phase began in July and ends in November 2011. The second phase is the citizens’ summit itself, on November 11, when participants from across the country will gather at Tour & Taxis in Brussels. It is there and then that we’ll establish an outline of possible solutions. How do we want to deal with each other? What principles do we consider fair? What priorities do we share with each other? After the citizens’ summit follows the third phase: as was the case in Iceland, a small group of citizens will elaborate on the results. Over the course of several weekends, they will meet and discuss the results of the citizens’ summit in order to translate them into specific solutions. The third phase starts in late November 2011 and ends in April 2012.

Can citizens do this? Without doubt. Recent small-scale experiments at the VUB and the University of Liege indicate that ordinary people with diverse opinions are prepared to discuss those opinions in a constructive manner and find solutions to complex problems. A citizens’ summit like the G1000 is comparable to a civilian jury in a court case. If average citizens, once they have become acquainted with extensive evidence, can reach a substantiated verdict on the guilt of a person, then they are certainly capable of assessing the political system of a country.

**Basic principles**

- Independence. The G1000 is a citizens’ initiative that wants to provide new oxygen to the democratic functioning of the state. It is independent and relies on objective scientific research.

- Openness. The outcome is not predetermined. There are no set preferences for any specific proposals. The G1000 only offers a procedure to talk about new proposals.

- Dignity. Participants of the G1000 recognize the fundamental legitimacy of everyone’s point of view. You don’t need to agree with someone in order to have an open conversation with them.
Optimism. A citizens’ summit such as the G1000 recognizes the seriousness of the Belgian crisis, but rejects any cynicism or defeatism. The initiative wants to foster positive and constructive thinking about solutions.

Complementarity. The G1000 is not a form of anti-politics; rather, it believes that politics is too serious to be left to politicians and political parties alone. Some politicians will perhaps worry that we want to make them redundant, but that fear is unjustified. The G1000 is a gesture of generosity from the civilian population towards those engaged in party politics.

Participation. Besides one thousand people will participate in the actual discussions, there will be a multitude of volunteers collaborating in this project. They will do their share in welcoming and guiding the participants; they will translate and provide food and entertainment. We invite everyone to help think about this initiative. You can join us through our website.

Transparency. In terms of funding, the G1000 is owned by citizens. Every donation of 1 euro is welcome, and nobody is allowed to offer more than 5 per cent of the total budget. The organizers have decided not to partner with any privileged sponsors or media; we believe in crowdfunding: individuals, companies, associations and governments are all invited to contribute.

Opportunity. The current crisis is also an opportunity: a chance for democracy to gain new impetus, for citizens to renew democracy and make politicians aware of their involvement and priorities.

Dynamics. As the largest deliberative process ever conducted in Europe, the G1000 will kindle the interest and admiration of the international community and provide people with a new sense of historical momentum. A democracy that reinvents itself through the involvement of its own citizens – that is an exceptional process.

Published 2 November 2011

Original in English
First published in G1000
Downloaded from eurozine.com (https://www.eurozine.com/g1000-manifesto/)
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