# **KEYPAD for Sudden Self-Rule**

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'Grub first; then ethics.'

(Brecht)

## **1. Refusal**

When shot at, intimidated by drunken men in stained uniforms; when walking and crying and dragging a suitcase; when afraid, exhausted and so outraged that you stamp your feet and tear your hair - you will, in time, refuse. The anger just turns, and you no longer obey. People then gather outside, talking.

Nothing works. Sometimes there is no power, food, hope or water. The roads are blocked and emergency services are overwhelmed. The government and its outsourced companies have withdrawn. People are stealing food.

Sudden organisations now appear, mushrooming up to secure provisions and defend them, to search and cook, treat the sick, make decisions. Even if forced into using only the weapons of the weak - like a go-slows, walking-off, sabotage, ridicule and suicide - these will be widely used.

There are patterns of organisation, shapes and glyphs that emerge in crisis situations and repeat across histories and cultures.

We never did learn to manage power in groups.

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## **2.** **In Parallel**

Sometimes, in the face of pressing needs, formal institutions are revealed to be so damaged, so irrational – their purpose long forgotten, their damage invisible to its members – that they *cannot* be reformed. Clogged by excessive and defensive hierarchies, bureaucratic ritual and corruption, they become wasteful, incompetent, illegitimate and cruel. This is what institutions do if you do not care for them.

To organise is to survive, and the creation of resourceful, quick and parallel institutions happens fast. Best is to agree a procedure for decision-making and prepare everyone to be involved. Held in the hand and puzzled over, organisational shapes focus our attention on the ebb and flow of information and the making of meaning.

Walking away from corrupt institutions means losing resources, but so does allow for other ways of organising - in parallel.

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## **3. The Assembly and its Council**

No power can be *right* without an Assembly of the people. As the sovereign body, the Assembly cements and celebrates the group. It is noisy, social and exciting - a space for the display of character and conflict. The assembly can arbitrate, decide and plan. It consents to decisions already made in other arenas, organisations and groups (particularly its Council), and it evaluates - in public - chosen leaders at the end of their service.

The ability to manage an Assembly of citizens is a central concern in any democracy but is largely a lost art. We show our lack of public experience when we gather together without organisation, use valuable public time to vent our own concerns, are bamboozled by elites pretending to ‘consult’ us, or when told that, for equality to be real, *all* must speak. The Assembly is not a space for the dogged bleating of private interests and is better conceived as a public place of open deliberation and argumentation. For an Assembly to gather collective knowledge, it needs a Council to serve it, organise its discussions, filter its information and direct its agenda.

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## **4. Council Membership**

Nowadays, Citizen Assemblies are rare, and many Councils rule without them as unbridled elites. Armed only with the simplistic vote, they must win the most votes to be able to make decisions on our behalf. As such, representatives are choked-off from information and know little of those they represent. Councils that do not serve Assemblies become separated, serving themselves and coming at last to inhabit a different world than those over which they rule.

The purpose of representation is one of simplification and filtration, here in order to make executive decisions. To achieve this, representation harvests individual citizen preferences and aggregates them into a ‘social choice’ – through political parties, policy bundles and (inescapably value-laden) electoral systems. The information that arrives in most Councils of decision-makers is thus a severe simplification of the collective will, shorn of its complex synergies and starved of deliberative exploration and aggregation. Representation should, therefore, only ever be a minor method for insuring that certain otherwise-invisible voices are heard by the Council.

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## **5. Talking & Deciding**

Public discussion gathers information from diverse individuals and groups. Yet to make a decision, all this noise and information must be reduced and focused. Decision-making is a ‘bottleneck’ of collective information-processing, one that entails a necessary reduction of information.

Most collective decisions are made without adequate deliberation and are harried by voices that demand an end to talk. Decisions then ignore what little deliberation there was and immediately cut through its complexity with voting and majority decision rules.

There is a time for deliberation – as much as can be afforded - and a time for decision-making. Communities must *talk* possibilities into existence that did not exist beforehand. Just as an expert witness assists the jury in a court, so can they assist ordinary citizens in debates.

There is a time for decision-making - and sometimes there is no time at all. Before the emergency occurs, prearranged procedures for rapid information processing must be put in place, regularly revisited and carefully tweaked. While a perfect democracy ‘takes too many meetings’, perfect authoritarianism has no meetings at all. Somewhere in between is a citizenry that deliberates when they can and decides when they must. If this requires leadership, it must be time-bound, rotated and afterwards, held to account. Did the leader obey the people?

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## **6. Rotation & Lot**

Council members are not isolated representatives but ever changing delegates, selected from other fora by processes of rotation and lot. Randomly chosen, all have their time as Council members, as in this way, citizens learn to participate effectively and to carry the preferences of the forum from which they come. Where such a Council requires specialist knowledge, they request it. Where a Council requires the filtering of information to enable decision-making in the Assembly, they learn to deliver it – after which they return to their respective forums with an account of how they did so.

Spreading the role of Council membership (as with a jury) enables collective decision-making to benefit from the expertise of ordinary people. It repeatedly demands that citizens improve their capacity for self-rule, agree to actions taken in their name and share their Council experience with others. This wider dispersal of political expertise not only prevents the development of a static, separate and corrupted political class (endlessly endured), it also educates the citizenry and garners information from diverse micro- and counter-publics. Where the stunted Western electoral democracies waste the knowledge of ordinary citizens, rotation and lot ensure continued responsiveness, accountability and resilience.

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## **7. Using Hierarchy**

All groups, organisations, and gangs must make good use of their members' skills and manage the hierarchies they inevitably brings into being. We need leaders and hierarchies to manage the group's information, but problems arise when these hierarchies outlast their usefulness and become stuck, separated, self-interested, defensive and deleterious to health. Hierarchy therefore requires careful management and vigilant scrutiny. It should be time-bound, related to projects and accountable at the end. It is generally best avoided. Groups would do well to adopt a ferocious egalitarianism in regard to wealth, as this always translates into excessive hierarchy, and signs of corruption by power should be regularly monitored by citizens and acted upon with severity.

A leader is a servant of the group and they are answerable for their actions when their term has ended. Did they help?

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 **8. Terrain**

The thick mix of materials and symbols that surround us has its own logic, somehow raging independently – even though we created it. Our own imaginings, like a solar flare, approach menacingly from outside. At the very height of civilization - in the thin veneer of order - life changed, work got harder and faster with more checks and bureaucracy, performance indicators, mere measurements of the appearance of work. Everyone was a suspect and a possible 'free-rider' and we were commodities, with even our attention monetarized. We tore up communities and, in our institutional life, choked on a foaming sludge of administration. Many dedicated their entire working lives to these convoluted figments, dumbly calculating cartoon metrics so childish as to be absurd. As if through a leak – this will be no surprise – meaning drained from the world. All the lying and advertising, political spin, ‘choice architectures’ and ‘genuine fakes’ meant that, as Thucydides once said, “words lost their meaning.” It was this that destroyed the ancient Greek world and the civil wars that followed.

Learning to *appear* to be busy, to uphold *and believe* the values of the institution, to *be seen* to give value, to have been trained, to meet standards. Gullible, and longing for obedience, we wandered into believing our public institutions and profit-chasing companies were trying to provide goods and services, whereas in truth, their cloying mission statements concealed a world of abject dysfunction, primitive hierarchic behaviour and wasted knowledge. This was ‘audit culture’, swamped by ‘rituals of verification.’ This was the solar flare that came at us from outside – social and historical processes that are independent of our beliefs. One no longer ‘looked after Grandma’, but instead generated units of ‘social care.’ One did not teach, but met ‘learning objectives’. What had been coordinated by talking and trust was thereby ‘colonized’ by administration. That sticky foam, streaked yellow and sprayed down the throat by soldiers; that froth of administration whipped up real: institutions slip so easily asleep, drifting in small steps to at last emerge, blinking, far from their core purposes, vulnerable, corrupt and bloody.

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## **9. Scaling**

Local, Regional, Sector Assemblies with their respective Councils articulate with the sovereign General Assembly in fractals. Minimal organisation, local and carefully egalitarian.

'Princes are more dangerous than the people.'

(Machiavelli)

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