

CONSENSUS OR VOTING

Extracts from a correspondence between David Gribble and Milan Rai after the Peace News Camp in July

Dear Mil,

I don't like people breezing into week-long events, giving a talk or a workshop and breezing out again, which I am afraid is exactly what I did at the Peace News Camp. I particularly regret not having used the opportunity to provide a full answer to the man who asked whether schools like Summerhill and Sands made decisions by majority voting rather than by consensus, and if so, why.

I said I had not seen consensus working anywhere, and my questioner said that the Quakers had been using it successfully for hundreds of years, and no decision could be taken if there was a single voice against it. We left it at that, because other people had other things to discuss.

What I wish I had said was that majority voting, after all opinions have been properly heard, allows people to say later, when decisions have the wrong results, that they had never accepted them in the first place. Where everyone is obliged to consent, some are bound to do so against their better judgement, but they cannot afterwards avoid sharing the blame for something that was not their fault.

I have never actually been part of a community ruled by consensus, but my views are based on one conversation with a woman who lived in such a community, and a staff meeting at the White Lion Street Free School, which the staff ran as a co-operative. The woman I spoke to was a strong advocate for consensus, because, she said, if she held out for her point of view long enough, she always got her way. At the White Lion one of the staff said that he was prepared to go along with a decision made at a previous meeting, but that he was not prepared to say that he agreed with it. The rest of the staff unanimously sacked him.

Majority voting, it seems to me, prevents determined people from holding out for ever with no motivation but the desire to get their own way, and allows those who disagree with particular decisions to remain in the community unless they themselves decide to withdraw.

David

Dear David,

I think one of the problems is that the term consensus is used in different ways by different people. Formal consensus, as I've been taught it, has several options for 'not agreeing'. Different words are used, but it boils down to three basic categories:

supportive disagreement: I don't agree, but I'll go along with it and even help to make it happen;

unco-operative disagreement: I don't agree, but I'll let you do it – but I won't raise a finger to help you;

the block: I don't agree and I feel so strongly about it that I will veto this action by the group (and maybe even leave the group if it goes ahead).

If these options aren't made clear to everyone at the start of the process, then it's not really consensus decision-making, I think. A lot more to say, but I thought I'd just point that out!

Mil

Dear Mil,

Thank you for your three categories of disagreement, which I find extremely sensible. The White Lion incident could not have happened if they had stuck to these principles, although the insistent woman from the commune could still always have got her own way by keeping everyone up all night till they gave in.

Recently there has been an attempt by some of the people setting up EUDEC, the European Democratic Education Community, to require certain decisions to be made unanimously, which luckily was not accepted – presumably by vote, as otherwise that decision could not have been reached. I think probably quite a lot of people use the terms consensus and unanimity as if they were interchangeable.

The system of voting at Sands usually works out more or less like your consensus with three degrees of disagreement. When there is strong disagreement discussions go on for longer before a vote is taken, and because of the general flexibility of the system I would expect someone who had particularly strong views to be able to bring something up again at a subsequent meeting before a decision was taken, but it seldom arises. Controversial issues very occasionally get discussed for days

Perhaps voting is just a quick way of finding the opinion of the meeting. Sometimes the more articulate people dominate a discussion, frequently repeating points that have already been made, while most children (and some adults) remain quiet if what they want to say has already been said. This can produce unexpected results when the vote is taken, because although one opinion has been expressed more often and more eloquently, other opinions are valued more highly by the silent majority. If you are running a meeting by consensus, how do you find out who agrees and who disagrees without actually voting?

David

Dear David,

Requiring unanimity is a recipe for paralysis, I think! (Or coercion.)

I think the problem of the bully (the person determined to have their own way) is, ultimately, unresolvable until the person is changed by some means outside the meeting. I think in practice any sensible consensus-decision-making organisation has a process of attempted consensus, if that fails weaker consensus (consensus minus one 'vote'), if that fails some form of voting (sometimes where the vote fails if there is a large measure of abstention).

You ask, "If you are running a meeting by consensus, how do you find out who agrees and who disagrees without actually voting?"

What often happens in activist circles now is 'temperature-taking' – a proposition is floated and people waggle their hands high to show approval, low to show disapproval and in the middle to show indifference. It's not a vote, but it then guides the way the discussion is facilitated.

That's faster. Personally, I think there's a lot of merit (in an important decision) to spectrums, where people stand in different places in the room depending on how they feel about the issue. The good thing about it is that you see immediately where the strong feelings/majority opinion is - everyone has to constantly express their feeling, even if it is to stand in the middle in the 'don't know/don't care'. Then discussion is conducted by the facilitator choosing from the different ends, and people who feel strongly or have new points to make raise their hands to speak.

We did a lot of this during Peace News Summer Camp workshops, as it happens.

Cheers

Mil

Hi, Mil,

Thanks again.

I like the idea of temperature taking, and where there is strong disagreement I would like the idea of the spectrum. I think I have been wrong to be suspicious of the idea of consensus when it can be conducted in the ways you describe.

Similarly, I think the people who are suspicious of voting see it as a confrontational system, and in a small community like Sands, where the basic principles are shared by everyone (or almost everyone) voting is only a way of confirming a general opinion. (I say basic principles are shared by everyone, but the most basic of the basic principles is that any aspect of the

school can be changed by the school meeting, and the school does change as the school population changes.)

Just as you suggest that in an organisation run by consensus there may be a need to fall back on voting, so in an organisation where decisions are made by vote, there may sometimes be a need for temperature-taking or the spectrum technique.

My proposal is that we should stop criticising each other's methods and agree that both are acceptable. Please waggle your hand at the appropriate level.

David

I totally agree with you that the voters and the consensers should co-exist happily. I think consensus fundamentalism is very unattractive and unjustifiable!

Best wishes,

Mil