

The Politics of Presence

Anne Phillips

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Loose Ends and Larger Ambitions
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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter addresses three issues. The first is whether the arguments for ensuring equal or proportionate representation by gender and ethnicity in legislative assemblies should also apply to social class. The second is whether focusing on the institutions of representative democracy blocks more ambitious proposals for extending democratic participation, for example, those put forward in arguments for associational or associative democracy. The third is whether the case for an equal representation of women and proportionate representation of ethnic minority groups should also apply to appointed bodies like quangos or the judiciary. The chapter concludes that the case for a politics of presence is strongest when allied to some of these larger ambitions.

Keywords: associative democracy, class, ethnicity, gender, judiciary, participation, political presence, political representation, quangos, representative democracy

In my opening chapter, I identified three major objections that are levelled at a politics of presence. The first was that giving additional weight to characteristics such as gender or ethnicity could over-politicize group difference, thereby disrupting social cohesion or political stability. The second was that making representation even partially dependent on such characteristics could weaken the basis for political accountability. The third was that reinforcing the role of group interest in politics could undermine a more generous politics aimed at a general interest or shared concerns. The resolution to all of these lies in the precise status to be attached to notions of 'group representation'. I have argued for active intervention to include members of groups currently under-represented in politics, but I have sought to drive a wedge between this and stricter notions of group representation. My arguments certainly anticipate that changing the composition of decision-making bodies changes the character of the issues and policies discussed. They do not, however, presume that such representatives pursue a homogeneous or static group interest. The politics of presence is not about locking people into pre-given, essentialized identities; nor is it just a new way of defining the interest groups

that should jostle for attention. The point, rather, is to enable those now excluded from politics to engage more directly in political debate and political decision.

Although these arguments apply with equal force to each of the case studies pursued in this book, the politics of presence points towards rather different policy recommendations depending on the nature of the excluded group. In relation to women, a straightforward quota seems entirely appropriate. Although gender quotas (p. 168) remain highly controversial, this is, on the whole, because they introduce significant elements of positive action; they are not additionally regarded as a serious threat to social cohesion or political stability. Gender quotas do not presume any unified 'women's position'; indeed, the shift from a more token representation of women opens up space for a wide variety of female politicians, only some of whom will feel themselves charged with responsibility for speaking for women as a whole. The problems associated with gender quotas are, in my view, largely pragmatic. Thus, in electoral systems that operate through single-member constituencies, and in party systems that allow the local constituency the main voice in candidate selection (both of these being features of the British system), it is impossible to impose a national quota without overriding local choice. In such contexts, quotas have to operate as a stronger version of targets—which is effectively what is happening in the British Labour Party today.

In comparison with racial or ethnic quotas, the introduction of minimum quotas for women and men is also less inherently problematic because there are self-evidently two sexes. Sexual difference keeps changing its historical meaning—this is no mere 'fact' of human biology—but it still revolves around a relatively uncontroversial distinction between women and men. Ethnic difference, by contrast, is far more intrinsically contested. Most discussions distinguish between an ethnic majority and ethnic minorities, and these ethnic minorities then lend themselves to a process of ever more precise subdivision. 'New ethnicities' are also continually being created—through intermarriage, through cultural transmission, through the myriad complexities of individual choice. It is only in the most unusual of conditions that a society divides into two distinct ethnic groups (I cannot think of a single instance in the world today), and, outside of these conditions, ethnic quotas will always fail to capture the diversity of ethnic identities. When these elements are combined with the disturbing historical associations that attach to racial or ethnic quotas, it is difficult to justify quotas as the best way of dealing with racial or ethnic exclusions.

The alternative strategy adopted in the USA has stressed the right to elect 'representatives of one's choice', and has relied on redistricting arrangements to deliver some approximation to proportionate presence. As already noted, this strategy may have reached its historical (p. 169) limits; for, while the geographical concentration of minority voters has allowed for a significant number of 'majority-minority' districts,

the total cannot be substantially raised without recourse to 'bizarrely' shaped electoral districts. This raises the prospect of a more explicit quota policy, but none of the authors discussed in Chapter 4 has argued in favour of this. In the American context at least, racial quotas are considered neither possible nor desirable.

The only partial exception that surfaces in this book relates to the underrepresentation of Aboriginal peoples in Canadian politics, and the widely canvassed proposals for guaranteed seats in a reformed Senate. The rights of indigenous peoples are often thought to raise issues that do not translate readily to other minority groups, partly because of the history of dispossession, and partly because indigenous peoples are seen as more self-evidently distinct in their cultural and political traditions. Even here, it may be said, questions arise about the definition of 'Aboriginal peoples', and how any system of guaranteed representation can balance the claims of the different groups contained within this description. When applied to the representation of other kinds of ethnic minority, setting a minimum quota for political office seems to raise more questions than it resolves.

In much of contemporary Europe, the category of 'ethnic minority' covers a wide spectrum of differently constituted groups; and, while members of each minority may feel themselves inadequately represented by members of the ethnic majority, they may feel themselves equally ill-represented by members of another ethnic minority. Attaching specific numbers to specified minority groups then becomes an unenviable task. Between the risks, on the one hand, of a simplistic dualism that distinguishes only between the ethnic majority and the rest, and the absurdities, on the other hand, of an endless quest for sufficiently pluralized categories, it is hardly surprising that quotas have won so little popular support.

Achieving proportionate presence for ethnic minorities is then a more complex process than achieving parity between two sexes. In each case, the first stage is to win support for the principles of a politics of presence: to achieve wider public and party recognition than the representative's race, ethnicity, or sex are matters of political concern. But whereas this recognition can translate into relatively (p. 170) straightforward numerical quotas by sex, it requires greater flexibility in the case of ethnicity or race. This suggests, perhaps, a policy of targets rather than quotas: something that recognizes the difficulty of attaching definitive numbers to a constantly shifting pattern of different ethnic groups, and is more attuned to the changing nature of ethnic identities. It also strengthens more general arguments in favour of multi-member electoral districts, and voting systems based on proportional representation. Any such developments fall considerably short of the kind of guarantee that can be delivered by gender quotas. The danger, of course, is that this can undermine the urgency attached to changing the ethnic composition of elected assemblies, and can push this project into the realm of the

distantly desirable rather than the immediately required. I have, as yet, no answer to this.

The issues raised by territorial or linguistic minorities further complicate the policy implications. As the Canadian example indicates, political presence cannot be regarded as the exclusive route to meeting what may be very different perceptions of political marginality, and it seems particularly inappropriate when what is at issue is incorporation into a majority norm. The Canadian example also reinforces an argument that has been made throughout the book: that recommendations on institutional design have to be tailored to local conditions, with a keen eye to the historical background and the likely consequences of future change. The theoretical arguments merely establish the validity of presence as part of the process of representation. It would be foolhardy to deduce a single set of policies that can be applied to each situation.

I

Though I cannot claim that my arguments have resolved all remaining queries around these points, I want to turn now to what I see as the most obvious loose ends. The first of these relates to the as yet unsettled role of class; the second, to those alternative strategies for democratization that can be roughly categorized as projects for spreading democracy more fully around; the third, to the underrepresentation of disadvantaged or minority groups in other institutions of government. I have focused primarily on the underrepresentation of women and people from ethnic or racial minorities, (p. 171) and I have considered their underrepresentation in relation to existing layers of elected government. This narrows—perhaps unnecessarily—the scope and implications of my argument. How far is it open to further extension?

On the first point, it might be said that I have engaged in some rather fancy footwork around who qualifies for political presence. I have distinguished my argument from those more general notions of mirror or descriptive representation, which might require the reflection of each and every characteristic of the citizenry inside the governing assemblies; and I have argued that all serious claims to guaranteed representation have to be grounded in something more than a statistical mismatch between voters and those who represent them. There has to be an additional analysis of existing structures of exclusion, which then serves to identify the areas of most pressing concern. This might be grounded in the inequities of the sexual division of labour, which lend a false air of normality to the underrepresentation of women among those seeking political office; or it might be grounded in the historical formation of particular nations, which built themselves on denying racial equality, or the displacement of entire peoples.

This works well enough against facetious claims for the proportionate representation of people with blue eyes and red hair. It should also, though more contentiously, work

to discredit the claims of previously dominant groups who see their relative advantage slipping from their grasp. But the most persistent structure of political exclusion is surely that associated with inequalities of social class, and this is the one form of social division and inequality that has been remarkably absent from my discussion. How do I justify this silence on divisions and exclusions by class? Is this just another example of that contemporary displacement which has pushed class so far out of the picture? Or are there significant differences between class on the one hand and gender, ethnicity, or race on the other, which help make sense of this move?

One easy, but also disingenuous, answer is that representatives do not change their gender or ethnic identity when they are elected to political office, but do modify their class position. The unemployed can hardly demand representation by people without jobs, nor those living in poverty by people who are equally poor; for, once political representation becomes a full-time activity, it carries with it a salary, (p. 172) and the scale of remuneration is always set at a level considerably above the average wage. The use of public funds to pay elected representatives was indeed an early radical demand, designed to dislodge those with private sources of income from their previous monopoly, and to open up political office to people with no money of their own. Socialists used to argue that this payment should correspond to average wages (this was one of the principles that Marx and Lenin, for example, derived from the Paris Commune), but this is not practised anywhere in the democratic world. In terms of both income and employment, those elected to decision-making assemblies enjoy a relatively privileged position, and this makes it harder for them to claim themselves as true representatives of the working class.

Defining class by income is a rather suspect simplification, however, and representatives who originate from the working class will not necessarily change their cultural or political identities just because they now earn more money than their peers. The unemployed or the poor could certainly ask to be represented by people with a prior experience of poverty or unemployment, and those in manual employment could equally well lay claim to representation by people with a prior experience of manual labour. The British Labour MP, Aneurin Bevan, used to say that full representation was achieved only when the people elected 'spoke with the authentic accents' of those who elected them, and were 'in touch with their realities'; ¹ this appeal to shared experience seems as legitimate in the case of class as it does in the case of gender or race. Neither the past nor present condition of such representatives is likely to be wholly 'representative'; in the British experience, those MPs or councillors who can best claim to be working-class often have an untypical trajectory which may take in years as a trade union organizer or significant periods in higher education. But if the general case for political presence stands, it is not clear why it should be limited to women or those who are in a racial or ethnic minority. One of the recurrent complaints against guaranteed representation

for members of particular social groups is that this can become a vehicle for more self-interested career advancement. Extending the argument to take (p. 173) in guaranteed representation by class would go some way towards settling this suspicion, and would make it more abundantly clear that the politics of presence involves a critique of political élites.

A more subtle, but perhaps equally disingenuous, argument is that 'working class' is an empty category, a term that suggests more substantial unity of interests and priorities than is ever justified by political events, 'a signifier without a signified'.² Since much of my argument has been concerned with challenging equally suspect assumptions of unity around categories such as female or black, this is hardly a definitive objection. My own understanding of demands for equal or proportionate presence detaches them from any presumed grounding in essential identities, and argues that any politics of presence should work in tandem with the equally pressing politics of competing ideas. Group interests, needs, preferences, or perspectives do not come to us ready-made by material conditions, and their representation is never absolved from processes of internal contestation and debate. If this is true, as it undoubtedly is, for those disparate groupings we may gather together under the heading of 'working class', it is equally, if not more, true for women, for black or Latino Americans, for Aboriginal women and men, for francophone or anglophone Canadians. This undermines suspect notions of 'authentic' or 'organic' representation, but it does not dent the general case for equal or proportionate presence.

If there is a basis for distinction, it lies in the historically greater importance attached to class issues and class concerns. Working-class people have always been marginal to the circulation of political élites, but, as a principle for defining the major options in political life, class itself has had an extraordinary presence. For much of the last two centuries, class has operated as the organizing symbol for defining the political spectrum, dividing parties and movements according to their stance on competition and co-operation, capitalism and socialism, the free market and planning, private property and social equality. As historians of the nineteenth and twentieth century have shown,³ this could hardly have happened without a (p. 174) powerful organizing impetus from working-class constituencies and groups: class did not erupt on the scene just as a tool for social or economic analysis. But the alternatives that were derived from experiences of dispossession, poverty, unemployment, or deepening inequality did then develop a life of their own. Class came to exist on at least three, potentially separate, levels: it became a form of social analysis; a way of describing the conditions to which working-class people were subjected; and a promise of a new kind of political identity. Marxists have frequently talked of the difference between a 'class in itself' and a 'class for itself', the first referring to an objective unity that stems from shared relations of production, and the second to the moment when that unity becomes the self-conscious basis for

political solidarity and action. But class has also been the nexus around which people organize their competing analyses of social conditions and competing programmes for social and economic change. It became the code#word for a new set of political ideas.

In the conventional triad of race, class, and gender, class then stands out as the one most detachable from experiences of oppression or exploitation. To say this is not just to restate the widely remarked phenomena of the bourgeois socialist and the working#class conservative. The class origins of those who identify with socialist or social democratic politics have always been astonishingly diverse (as, indeed, have been the class origins of those who identify with its opposite); but shared experience is never a guarantee of shared political beliefs, and class is only one of many demonstrations of this. The roll#call of the men who have thrown themselves into struggles for sexual equality may be rather short, but many white people campaigned for the abolition of black slavery in the Americas, or joined in the later campaigns for black civil rights. People's political priorities and beliefs do not simply reflect personal needs or material conditions. The point about class is that it entered so thoroughly into the definition of political policies and programmes (most notably, though not exclusively, in Europe) that it did become more readily detachable from claims to political presence.

In terms of electoral politics in particular, what started as a movement for the representation of labour (labouring men *and* labour interest) has fallen victim to its own success. Though many regret the declining proportion of trade unionists or manual workers among those elected to local or national office, there is relatively little support (p. 175) for the notion that only workers can be trusted to devise appropriate policies for social equality, or that only those with a prior experience of poverty or homelessness or unemployment can know what is best to be done. The uncertainty that many have expressed in relation to policies on gender or race or the treatment of indigenous peoples—that sense of not really knowing without asking what it is that these people might want—has no strong parallel here; and the under#representation of the poor or those in manual employment is more commonly conceived in terms of the lack of vigour with which their interests are pursued. It is not that existing representatives are thought incapable of identifying either the problems or the solutions, but that they may not be sufficiently affected by the experiences to be trusted to carry the policies through.

The under#representation by social class is most commonly perceived in these terms, and does not then share that additional quality which lies behind current pressures for political presence. Those who argue for the proportional representation of women, or of men and women from ethnic or racial minorities, are concerned primarily with the construction of a new political agenda, with the articulation of previously unheard voices, and the development of new priorities and tasks. The demands would lose some of their urgency if the political agenda already incorporated the interests and

perspectives of these groups, and would have to fall back on the symbolic significance of achieving equal or proportionate representation, combined with the requirement for more vigorous advocacy. Though I have noted throughout that these are important elements in the arguments for political presence, I have continued to attach most weight to the policy changes that are anticipated from modifying the composition of political élites. This, in turn, reflects the relationship I favour between ideas and political presence. If all that matters is being there, with no further implication about the new policies we might expect to emerge, then 'who' the representatives are becomes entirely distinct from 'what' we want those representatives to do, and the proposed reforms become a vehicle for cultural rather than political intervention. If, on the contrary, the social or sexual characteristics of the representatives are regarded as a sufficient guarantee that they will perform as advocates for those who share these characteristics, ideas still drop out of the picture, and we are left with essentialist predictions about what generates (p. 176) political action. The real importance of political presence lies in the way it is thought to transform the political agenda, and it is this that underlies the greater priority now accorded to gender and ethnicity and race.

The frequent use of the term 'perspectives' is revealing here, for it reinforces that sense of issues not yet precisely delineated and priorities still to be defined. Class, by contrast, has been more typically discussed in terms of objective interest. Marxism, for example, developed an analysis of the objective conflicts of interest that were grounded in relations of production, and, despite troubled explorations of the conditions under which a 'class in itself' would turn into a 'class for itself', continued to regard these interests as independent of anyone's perception. One implication was that you did not need to experience exploitation in order to know what it meant; indeed, in Lenin's analysis of the role of intellectuals in revolutionary politics, experience of only one aspect of oppression or exploitation would engender a blinkered reformism that could not make the necessary connections. This more theoretically driven understanding of interests allows for representation (or leadership) by people other than those most directly concerned, but, in the subsequent shift to non-class bases of difference, the language of interests was supplanted by a rather different language of perspectives or approaches or concerns. The 'interests' of workers or pensioners or the long-term unemployed can perhaps be championed by those who fall into none of these categories. It is hard to see how the 'perspectives' of women or black Americans can be articulated, except through representatives who are female or black; and this requirement is even more pressing when we consider what may be fundamental differences of value, as in the relationship of indigenous peoples to the natural world. The case for presence is particularly powerful when it addresses those ideas or concerns or values that have not yet reached the political stage, or when it looks at preferences not yet formulated and possibilities not yet explored. Because of its prior dominance, class does not fall so neatly into any of these categories.

Though I say this with some trepidation, I believe that the above does provide a basis for distinguishing between the political exclusions associated with class and the political exclusions associated with gender or race. It also, however, indicates important areas of (p. 177) overlap. Objective analysis of class interest or class conflict tends to operate at a level of generality which leaves many considerations untouched, and there is still a sense in which the underrepresentation of working-class 'perspectives' can lead to policies that override or ignore working-class concerns. In the post-war reconstruction of Britain, for example, inner-city (often bomb-damaged) slums were torn down, and new housing estates were rapidly erected to provide workers with improved accommodation. But the forcible relocation of entire communities to what later became the 'sink' estates of the 1960s and 1970s was neither an architectural nor a social success, and many have attributed the failures of post-war planning to the lack of consultation with the people whose lives were being arbitrarily transformed. Those who developed the policies may have been thoroughly committed to what they saw as working-class interest, but in their top-down analysis of objective need, they failed to engage with what local people could have articulated as their immediate concerns.

The critique of post-war planning has obvious parallels with feminist critiques which stress the underrepresentation of women in the formulation of public policy. In both cases, what is at issue is the construction of the political agenda, and the way that the composition of the policy-makers can limit the range of perspectives and concerns. Where policy alternatives can be established with all the rigidity of 'objective' conditions, then political presence may be more of an optional extra, or something with primarily symbolic effects. There is no real substitute for being there when new policies are being developed—and no real basis, at this point, for differentiating between gender and class.

Examples drawn from housing, however, or the broader area of urban or regional renewal, tend to focus attention on the underrepresentation of local or community voices: the emphasis is on failures in local consultation or representation, rather than on an underrepresentation at national level. When contemporary theorists address the problem of class-based exclusion, this is usually the level at which they work, linking the more direct representation of working-class people and concerns to some form of decentralization. This could be viewed just as capitulation to political reality; for, however controversial the guaranteed representation of women or ethnic minorities is proving, it is in many ways less threatening to current practices of democracy than guaranteed representation by social class. Most of (p. 178) those who benefit from gender quotas, for example, will resemble the current incumbents of political office in their occupational or class characteristics, and this makes it easier to include them as new members of the political family. This bow to political reality is partially shored up by the fact that class already defines the political agenda. But the exclusion of

working#class *perspectives* seems just as problematic for contemporary democracy as the exclusion of women or ethnic minorities—and, indeed, goes a long way towards explaining current disaffection with the political process. When it comes down to it, the real reason for my silence on class is simply that it does not lend itself to the same kind of solutions. This is as much a failure of political imagination as any more theoretically driven distinction.

II

This point opens up the second area that has been relatively untouched in my discussion so far, which is the very status of representative democracy, and the way it can block more ambitious proposals for extending the incidence and scope of democracy. The preoccupation with sexual or racial exclusions tends to focus attention on the composition of existing élites, whose remarkable homogeneity is what first strikes the excluded observer. Earlier concerns with classbased exclusions usually pushed critics towards a more sceptical indictment of the limits of representative democracy. It seemed all too apparent that a process of democratic representation which centred on electing representatives to national office would continue to disadvantage working#class people, and that a more radical scenario was required to spread the democracy more resolutely around. The places where democracy should be practised then became an even more burning issue than what happened in the conventionally political sphere. In G. D. H. Cole's version of guild socialism, this developed into a functional democracy in which those interests involved in production or distribution would be directly represented in the bodies that carry out the function; ⁴ in the early work of Carole Pateman or the later work of Robert Dahl, it developed into an argument for workplace democracy, ⁵ in recent formulations of associative democracy, (p. 179) it has developed into a case for voluntary and self#governing associations that will take upon themselves many of the responsibilities now claimed by central government. ⁶

The arguments for associative democracy are particularly pertinent here, for they are often developed against the background of new social movements, and explicitly acknowledge the way these have altered the roll#call of political actors. Paul Hirst, for example, argues that 'politics is moving away from the great left#right oppositions created in the nineteenth century', and he stresses 'the rise of new political forces that cannot be accommodated on the old political spectrum'. ⁷ His argument parallels much of what I have said in my case for a new politics around representation: that politics used to be organized around a largely class#derived 'social' question; and that the subsequent differentiation, around issues of gender equality or the prevalence of racism, generates forces that are 'too diverse, too concerned with different issues, to be placed on a single spectrum'. ⁸ But where I have taken this as requiring a greater plurality at the national level—a more heterogeneous bunch to represent us, and charged with

representing us in more dimensions—Hirst takes it as requiring a greater plurality in self-governing voluntary associations. The state remains too much tied to the older binary divides to meet the needs of the heterogeneous citizenry.

In most of the scenarios for associational or associative democracy, the powers and responsibilities of central government would be severely curtailed. Federal and regional governments, for example, would retain the responsibility for raising taxes, but would distribute the public funds among recognized associations which would take on most of the responsibility for delivering services. In Philippe Schmitter's variation, central government would issue vouchers to citizens, redeemable against public funds, which they could then distribute to whichever associations they favoured.⁹ These associations (p. 180) might constitute themselves on an ethnic or religious basis, might indeed be organized as all-women collectives; but they would be bound by certain public conditions, which could determine the basis on which they could refuse membership or their procedures for democratic self-government. Paul Hirst stresses that most of the conditions would come into play only when the associations sought public funding; otherwise, associations would be free to form on any basis they chose, subject only to very basic conditions.¹⁰ Philippe Schmitter argues that the basic conditions should remain very minimal, including perhaps just the requirement to be non-profit-making, and to demonstrate some democratic process through which the leaders of the association are selected.¹¹ In either case, the inclusion of the previously excluded is achieved through maximizing the range and number of associations, rather than dictating the arrangements within each.

Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers suggest a more interventionist version, arguing that conditions could be set in such a way as to promote deliberative behaviour.¹² Through a combination of taxes, subsidies, and legal sanctions, groups could be fashioned so as to promote the organized representation of presently excluded interests, and encourage the members to be more other-regarding in their aims:¹³ those groups that encompass a higher proportion of the relevant population, for example, or address a wider range of issues and concerns, might be favoured over those more narrowly defined.¹⁴ Critics of Cohen and Rogers have noted a tendency to reproduce older configurations by drawing on models from trade union or workplace democracy,¹⁵ but this alone could be treated as an oversight. There is no reason, in principle, why associational democracy (p. 181) cannot extend itself to take in the self-governing lesbian collective that wants to provide informational networks to support young lesbians, or the organization of black mothers that works to improve the educational chances of black children. The more fundamental question is whether exclusions from decision-making are better dealt with by increasing the range of opportunities for different groups of citizens to participate in the policy process, or by guaranteeing their presence in elected assemblies.

The level or size of these assemblies is not particularly significant here, for, while I have focused primarily on developments at the national level, my arguments can apply equally well to national or regional or local assemblies, or to the election of governments for cities or towns. It is not really the relationship between centre and locality that is the issue, but rather the relationship between elected, representative assemblies (whose electoral base may be large or small, but will always include all the adults within the area) and self-selected, functionally specific associations. Both can make some claim to be the more democratic or egalitarian. The first gives each citizen an equal right to vote, but the electoral process then generates a separate caste of political representatives, who take upon themselves the decision-making power. The second is not so inclusive, but it gives direct power to those who implement decisions, rather than ceding this to a distant élite. Both can also claim to be the better site for incorporating group difference: the first through the mechanisms I have advocated for achieving a more proportionate distribution of office between different social groups, the second through encouraging heterogeneity and the self-organization of the previously excluded. But the strategies pull in different directions, for equality of access is assured in the first place through achieving a more balanced or proportionate representation, and in the second place by multiplying the possibilities for self-organization. Conditions attached to the second might also appeal to principles of equal or proportionate presence—outlawing racial or sexual discrimination, for example, or making increased funding conditional on including the relevant constituencies—but the emphasis on *voluntary* associations limits how intrusive such conditions can be.

The importance I have attached to changing the composition of elected assemblies does not set me in conflict with additional moves towards associative democracy, though the importance that others (p. 182) have attached to associative democracy might well lead them to disparage my obsession with political élites. (Changing these might still be a legitimate objective, but more appropriately in a footnote capacity.) The one is, in principle, compatible with the other, for the arguments around political presence do not dictate positions on the role of voluntary associations, any more than they dictate positions on the decentralization of political decision-making or the appropriate relationship between various centres of power. But there is one strong sense in which what I have argued for can be achieved only within the more inclusive context of elected, and representative, assemblies. The introduction of the previously excluded is designed to alter the political agenda, and this implies intervention at that point where people engage with the full range of political alternatives and the full spectrum of policy concerns. Opening up space for new initiatives on service delivery or new approaches to conflicts at work does not deal adequately with this. When difference is incorporated through a *laissez-faire* encouragement that allows all differences to flourish, this does not sufficiently establish the conditions for transformation and change.

If political presence matters, it is because existing structures of power and representation have denied the pertinence of excluded perspectives and concerns, and the reassessments implied in this cannot be tackled through ceding power to a diversity of relatively autonomous voluntary groups. The hope (if not always the expectation) is that increasing the proportion of our representatives who come from disadvantaged and excluded groups will challenge and subsequently modify the basis on which public policy is defined. This can occur only in contexts which bring the differences together: where representatives who originate from one group are confronted with representatives who originate from another, and where the interaction between them produces something new. The only possible forum for this is that more inclusive assembly which draws together representatives from the citizenry as a whole: an assembly that might be local, regional, or national, but should in principle represent us all.

III

The realist student of politics might note at this point that legislative assemblies are not as powerful as they often like to think, and that (p. 183) transforming their gender or ethnic composition can leave untouched all those non-elected institutions that wield equally impressive powers. In the Nordic debates on gender quotas, it was often suggested that women had been allowed into parliament only when the real power had shifted elsewhere, and that the impressively gendered face of electoral politics masked a more traditional male dominance in the corporate structures of the welfare state.¹⁶ Key decisions were being taken outside of parliament by a plethora of public councils, boards, or committees, whose members were largely nominated by civil servants, thus not even by the parties in power. Since the nominees were drawn from the overwhelmingly male constituency of recognized 'experts', combined with the equally male dominated representatives of what were seen as the key interest groups, women were grossly under-represented. What was then being gained in the legislative assemblies was being lost in institutions elsewhere.

Recent developments in British politics raise parallel concerns over the explosion of so-called 'quangocracy': the proliferation of quasi-non-governmental organizations which now intervene between electors and the directly elected. Members are appointed to these bodies from what is popularly perceived a list of the 'great and the good',¹⁷ and political patronage combines with the old boys' network to throw up the same names again and again. It goes without saying that the resulting composition is profoundly unrepresentative, and the organizations only very tenuously accountable.

The politics of presence seems self-evidently appropriate to these further institutions of governmental power—and, in one sense, is even easier to argue. Where public

boards or committees conceive of themselves as including representatives from major interest groups (as tended to be the case in the Nordic countries), they make themselves immediately vulnerable to complaint if they exclude certain key players. The relevant constituencies are then open to contest, and in Norway in particular this became the basis for very successful initiatives to change the gender composition of the corporate (p. 184) structures. ¹⁸ If group representation is already part of the rationale, this lends itself even more readily than electoral politics to ensuring a fair balance between social groups.

But more typically, those appointing members to public commissions or regulatory bodies will appeal to notions of professionalism, proven 'track record', and expertise in the relevant areas; and these more deliberately sideline any claims to representative legitimacy. The work of these bodies is then defined in non-political terms (perhaps one should say quasi-non-political), and it becomes harder to inject any urgency into the underrepresentation of particular groups. If those serving on such bodies make no claims about representing discrete social interests—if they pride themselves, on the contrary, on being above the hurly-burly of political life—there is no such immediate opening for any politics of presence. Representation is not the name of their game; neither 'who' nor 'what' is really at stake.

The questions then revolve around two broader issues: what is the role of these bodies in politics, and what is the status of 'technical expertise'? The first is an increasingly live issue in contemporary debate, for the proliferation of quangos is widely perceived as a way of reducing public accountability for what are still public decisions, and there is considerable pressure for reintroducing some element of representative democracy. ¹⁹ Critics in Britain have noted that the membership of these bodies is heavily biased towards supporters of the party in power (i.e. that they are not so much above party politics as they sometimes like to pretend), and this suggests one direction of reform which would be more even-handed between political persuasions. This alone would give priority to ideas over social characteristics—and of itself might confirm the underrepresentation of minority groups—but at least it reopens the debate about what makes such bodies representative. The arguments about social composition usually refer back to a discourse of representation, and as long as this is ruled out of court, it is hard even to start comparing the relative merits of representation by political opinion and representation by social group. Once degrees of representation are (p. 185) allowed back into the picture, the politics of presence becomes equally applicable to these other institutions of government.

However, even failing such moves toward greater accountability for this plethora of appointed bodies, we can still query whether appeals to technical expertise mask the dominance of dominant groups. Civil servants, for example, are not normally regarded

as representatives, but we are still entitled to ask whether their perceptions of the available options are affected by their own more personal formation. In the Australian experience, opening up the higher echelons of the civil service to women proved to have a significant impact on the content and direction of public policy, introducing a series of feminist initiatives that had not been previously considered.²⁰ Many of these women were appointed explicitly as feminists (as part of a Labor government commitment to transform the decision-making process), and critics might then see this as an illegitimate politicization of a more properly neutral terrain. But the initiative reflected perceptions that the bureaucracy was not as neutral as it liked to proclaim, and that changing the composition of the civil service was a precondition for broadening the range of policy concerns. Who the bureaucrats are (their gender or ethnicity or race) can have a decisive impact on what they propose as desirable or possible, for, while past experience is no sure indicator of current opinion, it would be distinctly odd if it had no influence. If this is the case within the supposedly neutral regions of a career civil service, it is equally (if not even more) pertinent for those appointed to serve on public bodies. The politics of presence does then lend itself to this further extension, even when representativeness is not explicitly at issue.

The more difficult questions arise over the composition of the judiciary, which is notoriously 'unrepresentative' of women or ethnic minorities. Appointments to the US Supreme Court suggest that an informal quota now operates for women and blacks: that one out of the nine judges should be black; that at least one (currently two) should be female. Representations over the composition of the Canadian Supreme Court have variously suggested some form of quota provision for women, Aboriginal peoples, and Québécois—though the last is formulated in the language of ideas rather than (p. 186) presence, emphasizing familiarity with Quebec's legal code. Meanwhile those campaigning for the introduction of a Bill of Rights in Britain often meet up against the criticism that the rights would be open to interpretation by a non-elected judiciary that is overwhelmingly male and white, and that, failing adequate measures to modify the composition of this judiciary, a Bill of Rights would be no use at all.

All these point towards the politics of presence as applicable to the judiciary as well. But the judiciary is peculiarly inhospitable to notions of social representation, for judges—more than anyone—will see themselves as charged with standing above partial interest. The underrepresentation of women or ethnic minorities may still be regarded as a problem, but it is hard to see how women judges could regard themselves as 'representing' the interests of women, or ethnic minority judges as 'representing' the interests of ethnic minority groups. Special pleading might be appropriate for the barristers, but is surely the opposite of what the judges should do.

Ronald Dworkin has distinguished between what he calls 'choice#sensitive' and 'choice#insensitive' issues, ²¹ arguing that, while the former depend on the distribution of preferences within the community (hence a fair balance between different groups), the latter are independent of political choice. The only just decision about whether to finance a new road system, for example, would be one that took into account the different needs and preferences within the community. But the decision about whether to kill convicted murderers or outlaw racial discrimination should not, in his view, be regarded as similarly choice#sensitive: the right decision on such issues does not depend 'in any substantial way on how many people want or approve of capital punishment or think racial discrimination unjust'. ²² The implication, of course, is that certain decisions are legitimated only by the representativeness of those who take them, while others stand independently of this. When this is so, the precise composition of the judiciary may not be such a salient concern.

This conclusion, however, would follow only if we believed in impartiality as that 'view from nowhere', ²³ untouched by the experiences (p. 187) from which we have come. If, on the contrary, we see the pursuit of impartiality as depending on gathering the views from everywhere, then securing the diversity of the judiciary becomes as important as securing the diversity of the legislative assembly. In both cases, experience will affect our judgement, and a body that draws overwhelmingly on one set of experiences will be limited in its range of concerns. The difference is that, while members of the legislature *can* legitimately engage in special pleading (can constitute themselves as spokespeople for particular interests even while seeking to reach agreement with the others who are present), members of the judiciary cannot so legitimately regard themselves as 'representing' particular concerns. This is an important distinction (as is the parallel distinction between civil servants and elected politicians), and it makes it harder to argue for strict guarantees along the lines of equal or proportionate presence. But the composition of the judiciary is an additional and significant concern, and particularly so where the judiciary adjudicates constitutional concerns.

IV

The politics of presence does then carry wider implications beyond the more limited terrain which this book occupies. Even on this terrain, however, it speaks to a larger ambition. Part of this relates to the conditions that could make our decision#making assemblies more genuinely deliberative. Existing democracies spread themselves along a continuum between the tight disciplines of party politics, that are most clearly exemplified in Britain, and the kind of 'pork#barrel' behaviour that is more commonly associated with politics in the USA. In the first instance, the elected representatives have relatively little room for manoeuvre. They can moan, cajole, and press for new policy directions, but if they consistently vote against the policies decided by their party

leadership, they may find themselves forced to leave that party and to contest future elections under a different label. In the second instance, the elected representatives are less easily pushed into line, but their dedicated pursuit of sectional or regional interests is equally unfavourable to serious deliberation or debate. The politics of presence implies something other than either of these; for, while it anticipates the introduction of new kinds of interests and concerns (closer to pork#barrel than tight party (p. 188) disciplines), it also anticipates a process in which these will generate a wider range of policy considerations, modifying others and being modified themselves. If the new representatives have no space to express anything other than existing party policy, their inclusion becomes rather symbolic—which matters, but somewhat less than they hoped. If, on the contrary, the new representatives find themselves locked into sectional pursuit of sectional interest, their impact on the political agenda will be merely a function of their numerical weight. Failing the development of more deliberative conditions, the achievement of more equal or proportionate presence will not transform things as much as I claim, for it begins a process that cannot be completed without some additional change.

The other element in the larger ambition relates to the basis on which representatives can claim to represent 'their' people or group. Once we give up on the guarantees that would come with notions of an essential identity, the only sure basis for such claims would lie in alternative mechanisms of accountability that depend on the self#organization of the relevant group. Most radicals now admit to some doubts over the extent of this. Despite rumours of an explosion in political participation, ²⁴ most of us have revised our expectations downwards towards a cautious recognition that citizen involvement is uneven and rarely sustained. People are far more willing to sign petitions than participate in defining objectives, and even those who have thrown themselves into periods of intensive activity usually retreat into the background when the pressures on their lives become too great. Yet the only convincing basis on which representatives can claim to speak for aspirations not yet written into their party's programme is their relationship to organizations or movements that actively formulate group interests and concerns: this is the only way to ensure that what they say has wider purchase. Changing the composition of elected assemblies only improves the representation of excluded groups in what we might call a statistical sense; failing the development of more sustained conditions for consultation and discussion, it is an enabling condition, and still rather a shot in the dark. It is a better guarantee than we enjoy at present, which is enough to make it a political priority. But the real force of political presence lies in this further development.

(p. 189) Implicit in most of the arguments for equal or proportionate presence is a larger ambition that sees changing the composition of elected assemblies as part of a project for increasing and enhancing democracy. When the arguments are taken out of this

context, they have to rely more heavily on the symbolic importance of achieving more 'representative' assemblies; on the political realism that views representatives drawn from one group as ill-equipped either to recognize or to pursue the concerns of citizens drawn from another; and on the negative argument from justice, which asks by what right certain categories of people have ended up monopolizing representation. This is a powerful enough combination to justify the desired reforms, but does not yet capture the full intent. Put back into context, the argument often reveals a more ambitious programme which would alter the balance between citizens and representatives.

We might think here of the further initiatives that have been so typical of women's activities in politics: the use of the open forum, for example, as a way of consulting women in a local community; the report back to women's sections or women's conferences; the presumption of chains of connection that ought to link women politicians to activists from the women's movement. When the Icelandic Women's Party (Kwenna Framboðid) made its first substantial gains on city councils in the course of the 1980s, its newly elected councillors tried to sustain their relationship with the women who had campaigned for their election by setting up weekly meetings in which they could report back on issues arising in the council, and seek advice and feedback on what they ought to do. ²⁵ Over much the same period, a number of local councils in Britain set up women's committees to address the specific needs of women within their area, and these made extensive use of co-optation and the open forum as a way of consulting women outside the political parties. ²⁶ Even among those most committed to party politics (and many deliberately stayed outside, in the more amorphous politics of women's (p. 190) movement groups and campaigns), the political party has been viewed as an inadequate vehicle for representation, and women politicians have pursued what they saw as complementary ways of empowering women to make their needs better known. Neither of the examples I have given was a brilliant success: in the first case, the weekly meetings dwindled into fortnightly gatherings of six or so 'tired and disillusioned women'; ²⁷ and in both cases, those who came to the meetings or open forums tended to be untypical of women in the area as a whole. However, even if they do not provide exemplars for future representatives to follow, they do testify to the larger ambitions that have surrounded the election of more women.

The case for political presence is best understood in this broader context, and to this extent it confirms Hanna Pitkin's intuition. The argument for a more equitable representation of the two sexes or a more even-handed distribution between different ethnic groups does move in close parallel with arguments for a more participatory democracy. Those concerned with the under-representation of particular social groups look to the development of more deliberatory processes of decision-making within the representative assemblies. They also look to the development of new mechanisms of consultation, perhaps even accountability, that will link representatives more

responsively to the various groups' emerging concerns. We do not need this additional ammunition to make the case for immediate reform, but, as a more profound set of issues about democracy and representation, the politics of presence is at its strongest when it is associated with the larger dream.

Easier said than done, and I admit to considerable uncertainty as to what would bring either of these changes about. Recent explorations of deliberative democracy seem more concerned with what is desirable than with what is possible, while appeals to a more active and engaged citizenry often fall on deaf ears. But the factor common to both is their reformulation of the role currently claimed by political parties, and this links them to developments already occurring in the political world. Through much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, political parties defined themselves along a spectrum that derived ultimately from divisions by class. The declining salience of this spectrum has already loosened up the character of political parties, (p. 191) fostering a search for new kinds of party identity and new ways of formulating political divides. The growth of significant third parties in countries (like Britain) which are more used to an alternation between two parties in power is one indication of this.

²⁸ The much discussed 'post-materialist' analysis, which charts the growth of single-issue politics and the impossibility of tracking these along any single left-right divide, is another. ²⁹ Class can no longer operate as the master key which unlocks the major policy alternatives, and there is no obvious new candidate that can fill the vacated space.

In this diverse and diffuse context, it is harder to wrap up the citizens into neat packages of competing ideas. Political parties become more overtly what they have always in reality been: coalitions of different groups and objectives and interests, whose concerns have to be brought out into the open and more vigorously and continuously discussed. It can no longer be presumed that all policy alternatives are already known or already in play, and political parties then have to reach out to previously excluded constituencies and enable them to redefine the political agenda. Nor can it be presumed that all legitimate concerns will fit together in easy combination. Political parties then have to moderate some of their tighter disciplines, accept a greater degree of autonomy for the elected representatives, and recognize the validity of continuous discussion and debate.

Whether this will actually happen is harder to say. Perhaps the class issues that gave twentieth-century politics its urgency and bite will simply fall off the agenda, to be replaced by a bland sameness between parties that reduces both representation and choice. Perhaps there will be even further capitulation to the experts, or more passive fatalism among the citizens. What we can say, however, is that these outcomes are far less likely to emerge with the development of a politics of presence. Politics does not lend itself readily to guarantees, but this is one pretty safe prediction. (p. 192)

Notes:

(1) Quoted in A. Arblaster, *Democracy* (Milton Keynes, 1987), 84. Bevan was a member of the post-war Labour government, and saw himself as an authentic spokesman for the working class.

(2) E. Laclau, 'Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?', in J. Weeks (ed.), *The Lesser Evil and the Greater Good* (London, 1994), 167. As the title of Laclau's essay indicates, he is not saying that empty signifiers have no substance to the way that politics may develop.

(3) Most notably E. P. Thompson, in *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963).

(4) G. D. H. Cole, *Guild Socialism Re-stated* (London, 1920).

(5) C. Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge, 1970); R. A. Dahl, *A Preface to Economic Democracy* (Cambridge, 1985).

(6) E.g. J. Matthews, *The Age of Democracy* (Melbourne, 1989); P. Schmitter, 'The Consolidation of Democracy and Representation of Social Groups', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 35/4, 5 (1992); J. Cohen and J. Rogers, 'Secondary Associations and Democratic Governance', *Politics and Society*, 20/4 (1992); P. Hirst, *Associative Democracy* (Cambridge, 1994).

(7) P. Hirst, *Associative Democracy*, (Cambridge, 1994), 8.

(8) Ibid. 9.

(9) P. C. Schmitter, 'The Irony of Modern Democracy and Efforts to Improve its Practice', *Politics and Society*, 20/4 (1992).

(10) Thus: 'the Society for the Propagation of Racial Abuse would be outlawed, associations would be compelled to distribute audited accounts to their members, and to count one person as one vote': Hirst, *Associative Democracy*, 192.

(11) Schmitter, 'Irony of Modern Democracy', 511.

(12) Cohen and Rogers, 'Secondary Associations'.

(13) Ibid. 425.

(14) Ibid. 428–30.

(15) See the contributions by E. M. Inmergut, P. C. Schmitter, and I. M. Young to the special issue on associative democracy in *Politics and Society*, 20/4 (1992). On Schmitter's reading, for example, 'Cohen and Rogers are trying to ensure that class—capital and labour in their most encompassing organisational forms—will continue to occupy a predominant role in the policy process at the expense of more diversified sectional and professional cleavages and against the rising tide of less “productively” defined interests'. Schmitter, 'Irony of Modern Democracy', 510.

(16) H. Holter, *Patriarchy in a Welfare Society* (Oslo, 1984).

(17) With what one hopes was a hint of self-conscious irony, the Public Appointments Unit of the Civil Service Department used to refer to this *officially* as 'The List of the Great and the Good': see A. Davies, 'Patronage and Quasi-Government: Some Proposals for Reform', in A. Barker, (ed.), *Quangos in Britain* (London, 1982), 172.

(18) H. M. Hernes, *Welfare State and Woman Power: Essays in State Feminism* (Oslo, 1987).

(19) W. Hall and S. Weir (eds.), *Ego Trip: Extra-Governmental Organisations in the UK and their Accountability* (Democratic Audit of the UK/Charter 88, 1994).

(20) See the essays in S. Watson, *Playing the State: Australian Feminist Interventions* (London, 1990).

(21) R. Dworkin, 'What is Equality? 4: What is Political Equality?' *University of San Francisco Law Review*, 22 (1988).

(22) Ibid. 24.

(23) I. M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, 1990), 100.

(24) R. Topf, 'Electoral Participation and Beyond', in H. D. Klingeman and D. Fuchs (eds.), *Citizens and the State* (Oxford, 1995).

(25) L. Dominelli and G. Jonsdottir, 'Feminist Political Organization in Iceland: Some Reflections on the Experience of Kwenna Framboðid', *Feminist Review*, 36 (1988).

(26) See e.g. S. Goss, 'Women's Initiatives in Local Government', in M. Boddy and C. Fudge (eds.), *Local Socialism? Labour Councils and New Left Alternatives* (London, 1984); J. Edwards, 'Local Government Women's Committees', *Critical Social Policy*, 24 (1988 /9); A. Coote and P. Patullo, *Power and Prejudice: Women and Politics* (London, 1990).

(27) Dominelli and Jonsdottir, 'Feminist Political Organization in Iceland', 52.

(28) The character of the British electoral system (single member constituencies, electing whoever gets a simple majority) means that the two party system will continue to dominate at national level, but local councils are now far more variegated, and many are governed by party coalitions, where no one party holds majority power.

(29) See e.g. the essays in R. Dalton and M. Kuchler (eds.), *Challenging the Political Order: New Social and Political Movements in Western Democracies* (Cambridge, 1990).

