

The Politics of Presence

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From a Politics of Ideas to a Politics of Presence
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Abstract and Keywords

Introduces the distinction between a politics of ideas and a politics of presence. In the conventional understandings of liberal democracy, difference has been regarded primarily as a matter of ideas, and representation has been considered more or less adequate depending on how well it reflects voters' opinions, preferences, or beliefs. This has been challenged by an alternative understanding of political representation that stresses proportionate representation according to characteristics such as gender or ethnicity. The chapter addresses three objections. The first is that this alternative model of representation over#politicizes group difference, thereby disrupting social cohesion or stability. The second is that making representation even partially dependent on personal or group characteristics can under mine the basis for political accountability. The third is that reinforcing the role of group interest in politics can under mine a politics based on general interest of shared concerns.

Keywords: common interest, difference, ethnicity, gender, group interest, liberal democracy, political accountability, political representation, proportionate representation

In the conventional understandings of liberal democracy, difference is regarded as primarily a matter of ideas, and representation is considered more or less adequate depending on how well it reflects voters' opinions or preferences or beliefs. Problems of political exclusion are perceived either in terms of the electoral system (which can over#represent certain views and under#represent others), or in terms of people's access to political participation (which has proved particularly skewed according to social class). The personal characteristics of the representatives barely figure in this—except perhaps as an after#the#event grumble about the poor quality of our politicians. Most voters know too little about the candidates to make their talents or virtues the basis for political choice. Most voters, indeed, would query whether these should be a central concern. We might all wish to be represented by people we regard as wiser or more able than

ourselves, but, faced with a choice between someone more competent and someone whose views we can share, we usually feel safer in giving our support to the latter. The political party provides us with the necessary shorthand for making our political choice: we look at the label rather than the person, and hope we will not be let down.

Though it might seem rather grandiose to describe this dominance of party politics as a high-minded 'politics of ideas', the description conveys some at least of what is involved in current notions of representation. It suggests a broadly secular understanding of politics as a matter of judgement and debate, and expects political loyalties to develop around policies rather than people. It is not a particularly serious qualification to this to note that people's political loyalties (p. 2) are shaped by the communities in which they are born or live, or to recognize that people can 'inherit' attachments to a party that no longer seems consonant with the nature of their lives. Nor is it a particularly serious qualification to note that we give our support to those parties that fit better with our interests, for only the most detached understanding of political ideas would separate these from all aspects of material existence.

A better point of contrast would be with conditions in which party programmes become virtually irrelevant, where politics has been reduced to a stitching together of group-based support, or where votes are 'bought' by material favours. One might think here of the abuse of kinship networks and ethnic solidarities by political élites in post-colonial Africa, many of whom evacuated the terrain of contested policies and ideas to cultivate power bases around exclusionary identities. When the colonial powers retreated from Africa, they left behind them societies in which the state had become the main avenue for economic and social advancement, and where an alternative politics of patronage was almost doomed to flourish. In such contexts, people lived under what seemed an absence of politics, with the contrast between a civilian or a military regime seeming of far less consequence than whether you had access to any of the rulers. As ethnic connections emerged as one of the main routes of access, ethnic rivalries became quite literally deadly, and it is against this sombre background that African writers have so eloquently called for a politics based on vision or ideas. ¹

Which is not to say that all is well, or regarded as such, in the more established liberal democracies. Radical democrats, particularly those of more utopian bent, have continued to explore alternative avenues of 'typical' or 'mirror' or 'random' representation, which they have seen as a better approximation to the old dream of being ruler and ruled in turn, or as a more satisfactory way of ensuring that all interests are adequately addressed. John Burnheim, for example, has suggested that our interests are better protected when we are represented by those who share our experience and interests, and that this similarity of condition is a far better indicator than whether people might share our rather shaky opinions. ² He proposes a sweeping alternative

to electoral politics, in which decision-makers (p. 3) would be chosen by lot as a 'statistically representative' sample of the various groups concerned in the decisions. In *A Citizen Legislature*, Callenbach and Phillips also argue for representatives to be chosen by lot rather than elections, with the emphasis on ensuring that these representatives are a typical sample of the various interests spread across the society.

³ Choosing representatives on the basis of their beliefs or opinions (or, more strictly, which party they represent) is often seen as encouraging a mere façade of serious discussion, behind which the people with the money or the access to the media will make sure they get re-elected. This is not necessarily the best way to protect minority interests, nor does it particularly encourage citizens to deliberate on political affairs. ⁴

It is with this last in mind that James Fishkin has turned to random sampling as a way of combating the media-circus that surrounds the selection of presidential candidates in the USA. He suggests that a random sample of the voting-age population should be taken off for several days' discussion with and about the different candidates, and that this, combined with what he calls deliberative opinion polls, could inject a more serious note into the selection process. ⁵ The jury principle would then apply to a wider range of democratic institutions, involving a cross-section of the community and giving them the time to think about the issues at hand. ⁶

Despite such occasional incursions into new (or older) territory, most political theorists have been happy to stand by the arguments Hanna Pitkin wielded nearly thirty years ago against mirror or descriptive representation. In particular, they have shared her perception that an over-emphasis on who is present in the legislative assemblies diverts attention from more urgent questions of what the representatives actually do. 'Think of the legislature as a pictorial representation or a representative sample of the nation, and you will almost certainly concentrate on its composition rather than its activities.' ⁷ Yet representatives, Pitkin argues, are supposed to act, for (p. 4) what would be the point of a system of representation that involved no responsibility for delivering policy results? In her preferred alternative, it is the activities rather than the characteristics that matter, and what happens after the action rather than before it that counts. Representing 'means acting in the interests of the represented, in a manner responsive to them'. ⁸ Fair representation cannot be guaranteed in advance; it is achieved in a more continuous process, which depends on a (somewhat unspecified) level of responsiveness to the electorate. The representatives may and almost certainly will differ from those they act for, not only in their social and sexual characteristics, but also in their understanding of where the 'true' interests of their constituents lie. What renders this representative is the requirement for responsiveness. 'There need not be a constant activity of responding, but there must be a constant condition of responsiveness, of potential readiness to respond.' ⁹

Radicals may challenge this resolution as allowing too much independence of judgement and action to the representatives, but the direction their criticisms take also lends little support to proposals that focus on who the representatives are. The most radical among them will scorn what they see as a reformist preoccupation with the composition of political élites. Others will give serious consideration to changes that make existing assemblies more representative of the population as a whole, but they will prefer mechanisms of accountability that minimize the significance of the individuals elected. The shift from direct to representative democracy has shifted the emphasis from *who* the politicians are to *what* (policies, preferences, ideas) they represent, and in doing so, has made accountability to the electorate the pre#eminent radical concern. We may no longer have much hope of sharing in the activities of government, but we can at least demand that our politicians do what they promised to do. The quality of representation is then thought to depend on tighter mechanisms of accountability that bind politicians more closely to the opinions they profess to represent. Where such processes are successful, they reduce the discretion and autonomy of individual representatives; in the process, they seem to minimize the importance of who these individuals might be.

(p. 5) These are powerful arguments, and ones that I take very seriously. But, left like that, they do not engage sufficiently with a widely felt sense of political exclusion by groups defined by their gender or ethnicity or race. Many of the current arguments over democracy revolve around what we might call demands for political presence: demands for the equal representation of women with men; demands for a more even#handed balance between the different ethnic groups that make up each society; demands for the political inclusion of groups that have come to see themselves as marginalized or silenced or excluded. In this major reframing of the problems of democratic equality, the separation between 'who' and 'what' is to be represented, and the subordination of the first to the second, is very much up for question. The politics of ideas is being challenged by an alternative politics of presence.

The novelty in this is not the emphasis on difference, for notions of diversity and difference have been central to liberalism from its inception and to liberal democracy throughout its formation. The defining characteristics of liberal democracy, as Robert Dahl ¹⁰ among others has clarified, are grounded in the heterogeneity of the societies that gave it birth. It was the diversity of the citizenry, as much as its absolute size, that made the earlier (more consensual) practices of Athenian democracy so inappropriate to the modern world. Lacking any half#credible basis for seeing citizens as united in their goals, theorists of liberal democracy took issue with the homogenizing presumptions of a common good or common purpose, and made diversity their central organizing theme. John Stuart Mill's famous vacillations over democracy derived from a double sense of democracy as both impetus and threat to diversity: something that breaks the hold of any single notion of the good life, but can also encourage a deadening conformity.

In more straightforwardly confident vein, George Kateb has presented constitutional and representative democracy as that system *par excellence* that encourages and disseminates diversity. The procedures of electoral competition do not merely chasten and circumscribe the powers of government. By promoting a more sceptical attitude towards the basis on which competing claims are resolved, they also cultivate 'a general tolerance of, and even affection for diversity: diversity in (p. 6) itself, and diversity as the source of regulated contest and competition'. ¹¹

Difference is not something we have only just noticed. What we can more usefully say is that difference has been perceived in an overly cerebral fashion as difference in opinions and beliefs, and the resulting emphasis on the politics of ideas has proved inadequate to the problems of political exclusion. The diversity most liberals have in mind is a diversity of beliefs, opinions, preferences, and goals, all of which may stem from the variety of experience, but are considered as in principle detachable from this. Issues of political presence are largely discounted, for when difference is considered in terms of intellectual diversity, it does not much matter who represents the range of ideas. One person may easily stand in for another; there is no additional requirement for the representatives to 'mirror' the characteristics of the person or people represented. What concerns us in the choice of representative is a congruity in political beliefs and ideals, combined perhaps with a superior ability to articulate and register opinions. Stripped of any pre-democratic authority, the role of the politician is to carry a message. The messages will vary, but it hardly matters if the messengers are the same. (Those who believe that men have a monopoly on the political skills of articulating policies and ideas will not be surprised that most messengers are men.)

Once difference is conceived, however, in relation to those experiences and identities that may constitute different kinds of groups, it is far harder to meet demands for political inclusion without also including the members of such groups. Men may conceivably stand in for women when what is at issue is the representation of agreed policies or programmes or ideals. But how can men legitimately stand in for women when what is at issue is the representation of women *per se*? White people may conceivably stand in for those of Asian or African origin when it is a matter of representing particular programmes for racial equality. But can an all-white assembly really claim to be representative when those it represents are so much more ethnically diverse? Adequate representation is increasingly interpreted as implying a more adequate representation of the different social groups that make up the citizen body, and notions of 'typical' or 'mirror' or 'descriptive' representation have then returned with (p. 7) renewed force. This time they have the added attraction of appearing severely practical. Contemporary concerns over fair representation often translate into immediately achievable reforms, as with the quota systems that have been adopted by a number of European political parties to deliver gender parity in elected assemblies, or

the redrawing of boundaries around black#majority constituencies to raise the number of black politicians elected in the USA. This is not the world of mind#stretching political utopias, but one of realistic—often realized—reforms.

The precursor to this politics was the movement for the 'representation of labour', which swept across the fledgling democracies of Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and created what are today's labour or social democratic parties. The representation of labour was often a shorthand for two, potentially contradictory, notions, one of which looked to the increased representation of working#class men inside the legislative assemblies, the other of which pursued the representation of a labour *interest*, which might be carried by people other than workers themselves. At a time when labour politics held relatively few attractions for those not of labouring origin, the tension between these two was less discernible than it is today. But those involved in socialist and social democratic parties still argued fiercely over the relationship between intellectuals and the 'authentically' working class, some feeling that a socialist politics should privilege the voices and presence of workers, others that class origins or identities should signify less than adherence to socialist ideas.

In *What Is To Be Done*, Lenin offered one classic refutation of the politics of presence, and the basic premiss of his argument came to be widely agreed by people who had no time for the rest of his views. Stressing the multiplicity of arenas within which the power of capital was exerted, he argued the limits of an experience that was confined to any one of these, and the overriding importance of strategic links between one set of struggles and another. This privileged the all#seeing intellectual (who might in principle originate from any class position or fraction), the political activist who could look beyond each specific struggle or campaign to fit the various pieces of the jigsaw together. When socialist feminists challenged such arguments in the 1970s, one of the things they noted was that they denied legitimacy to women's self#understandings; another was (p. 8) that they presumed an objectivity on the part of these activists that raised them to a God#like level. As Sheila Rowbotham remarked in her critique of Leninist conceptions of the vanguard party, '[t]he Party is presented as soaring above all sectional concerns without providing any guarantees that this soaring will not be in fact an expression of the particular preoccupations of the group or groups with power within it.' ¹² Part of what sustained the development of an autonomous women's movement was the arrogance of those who thought that ideas could be separated from presence.

I

Contemporary demands for political presence have often arisen out of the politics of new social movements, and they all reflect inequalities other than social class. This is an important point of distinction, for as long as social class was regarded as the

pre#eminent group inequality, arguments could divide relatively neatly between the liberal position, which sought to discount difference (we should be equal *regardless* of difference), and the socialist position, which aimed at elimination (we cannot be equal until the class difference has gone). Once attention shifts to forms of group difference that are not so amenable to erasure, these alternatives no longer seem so plausible. Women do not want to change their sex, or black people the colour of their skin, as a condition for equal citizenship; nor do they want their differences discounted in an assimilationist imposition of 'sameness'. The politics around class always led back to those social and economic conditions in which class differences were grounded. Subsequent developments around race or gender or ethnicity lead more directly to the political level.

The politics that characterizes this is determinedly anti#paternalist, and reflects that explosion of self#confident and autonomous organization which developed in the civil rights movement in the USA, and the women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The question of who could best speak for oppressed or disadvantaged groups became a central concern within these movements; and in each case, an earlier unity that was premised on shared ideas gave way to alternative (p. 9) unities forged around shared experience. When a political movement sees itself as based on shared ideals and goals (combating racism, securing civil rights, achieving sexual equality), then commitment to these goals seems the only legitimate qualification for membership. But divergence over strategy and objectives soon combined with growing resentment over the organizational dominance of groups already dominant in the wider society to disrupt these earlier unities. This generated a more identity#based politics which stressed the self#organization of those most directly oppressed.

In the subsequent development of feminist politics, the question of who can best speak for or on behalf of another became a major source of tension, for once men were dislodged from their role of speaking for women, it seemed obvious enough that white women must also be dislodged from their role of speaking for black women, heterosexual women for lesbians, and middle#class women for those in the working class. The search for authenticity—or what Kathleen Jones sees as the dead#end pursuit of that experience which will ground one's authority ¹³—then makes it difficult for anyone to represent an experience not identical to her own and, taken to this extreme, renders dialogue virtually impossible. Most feminists have resisted this deadening conclusion, but the problems of authenticity rarely propel them back to the purer regions of a politics of ideas. Indeed, recent contributions have reframed the question of authenticity very much in terms of achieving equality of presence. Daiva Stasiulis, for example, criticizes the anti#racist guidelines developed by the Women's Press in Canada which sought to regulate the publication of white authors who had adopted central characters from a non#white culture. ¹⁴ Stasiulis notes that the implementation

of such guidelines unwisely circumscribes the capacity to write about experiences or cultures other than one's own, and inadvertently confines minority voices to work only with 'minority' issues or culture. But she goes on to argue that the real issue is not who should speak and from what perspective, but how to ensure full and equal access to publishing opportunities for Native women and women of colour.

(p. 10) In an article in the same collection, Anna Yeatman discusses an Australian debate over who can legitimately speak about rape or domestic violence within Aboriginal communities, and whether it is appropriate for white feminists to enter what might more properly be seen as an internal debate. She argues that this is less a matter of policing those white women who have dared to contribute to the discussion, and more a matter of ensuring that 'those who would contest our representations . . . are present to undertake the contestation'. ¹⁵ The search for 'pure authenticity' is now largely discredited, as much as anything, because each woman can lay claim to a multiplicity of identities, each of which may associate her with different kinds of shared experience. But the inclusion of previously excluded voices, and the changes this implies in political and other institutions, remains a dominant theme.

The greater insistence on group difference reflects what has been an absolute increase in social diversity, arising from recent patterns of global migration. Not that the scale of postwar migration is particularly unprecedented. It hardly compares with the accumulation of people who moved (or were moved) in the course of the Atlantic slave trade, the European settlements of Canada and Australia and Southern Africa, the Irish flight from famine, or the Jewish flight from successive waves of anti-semitism. But the direction of the migration is now more typically from the poorer to the richer regions of the world, and, perhaps more important, it brings together people from many different countries and cultures. Analysing the pattern of population movements in the modern world, Stephen Castles and Mark Miller identify what they see as four major characteristics: the globalization of migration, which means that more countries are affected, and by migrants from more diverse areas of origin; the acceleration of migration, which means that it is growing in volume in all the major regions of the world; the differentiation of migration, which means that each country may simultaneously attract refugees, people seeking shorter-term work opportunities, and people seeking permanent settlement; and the feminization of migration, which marks out current developments from what was previously a more male-dominated (p. 11) movement. ¹⁶ These features are reflected in some of the most overused terms in contemporary social analysis—*mélange*, *mosaic*, *patchwork*—all of which seek to capture that overlapping multiplicity of ethnicities and religions and cultures.

This multicultural diversity coincides with an equally striking process of homogenization, and the importance currently attached to group difference expresses a

complex double dynamic in which people have become more different and yet more the same. Commenting on recent tensions between Quebec and the rest of Canada, Charles Taylor draws attention to this strange irony, that the secession of Quebec from the rest of Canada became a real possibility just when the value differences had been eroded. An earlier contrast between the liberal English and the illiberal, priest-ridden, French (a contrast, Taylor argues, that was already founded on exaggeration) was swept away in 'the liberal consensus that has become established in the whole western world in the wake of World War II'; ¹⁷ and it was only as Quebec and the rest of Canada were reaching a broader consensus in their political cultures that the tensions between them became so acute. Also commenting on the coincidence of similarity with difference, Castles and Miller note that:

the move towards cultural pluralism corresponds with the emergence of a global culture, which is fed by travel, mass media and commodification of cultural symbols, as well as by migration. This global culture is anything but homogeneous, but the universe of variations which it permits have a new meaning compared with traditional ethnic cultures: difference need no longer be a marker of strangeness and separation, but rather an opportunity for informed choice among a myriad of possibilities. The new global culture is therefore passionately syncretistic, permitting endless combination of elements with diverse origins and meanings. ¹⁸

A similar process can be discerned in current gender relations, for women are demanding recognition as women just at a point in history when their lives are much closer to men's. Women's participation in the labour market has risen to an extraordinary extent, and, even allowing for high levels of sexual segregation in the (p. 12) employment structures of all contemporary societies, there has been considerable convergence in the life-cycles of the two sexes. The male monopoly over paid employment has been severely dented—in many parts of the newly industrializing world it is women who fill the factories, and in much of high-unemployment Europe it is women who get the new jobs—and, while women continue to dominate the lower paid, less skilled sectors, this inequality is along a continuum that brings men and women into closer connection. The attention currently directed to sexual and other kinds of difference cannot be understood just in terms of an absolute or growing difference. More precisely, it reflects a shift in political culture and claims, where people who may be significantly less different than at some point in the past come to assert a stronger sense of themselves and their identities.

II

The resulting emphasis on political exclusion, and what counts as political inclusion, significantly alters the framework for debates on political equality. The main achievement of nineteenth# and twentieth#century democracy was to make citizenship more universal: pulling down, one after another, all those barriers that excluded women, people with the wrong religion, the wrong skin colour, or just people with too little property. Subsequent debates have focused on what else might be necessary—in the shape of more substantial equalities in our social and economic life—to realize the promise of democratic equality. Marxism has offered one kind of answer to the question; post#war social democracy, with its emphasis on the social and economic conditions for equal citizenship, has offered another; John Rawls's difference principle, which regards social and economic inequalities as justified only when they work to the maximum benefit of those who are most disadvantaged, could be said to offer a third.¹⁹ Though these debates are far from resolved (even in theory, much less in practice), my main concern is with the more specifically political mechanisms which associate fair representation with political (p. 13) presence and emphasize changes at the political level: measures, that is, that regard the gender, race, or ethnicity of the representatives as an important part of what makes them representative, and seek some guarantee of equal or proportionate presence.

All such measures insist on deliberate intervention as necessary to break the link between social structures of inequality or exclusion and the political reflection of these in levels of participation and influence. All of them also agree in looking to specifically *political* mechanisms, seeing these as a pre#condition for longer#term social transformation. They take issue, therefore, with the complacencies of a free market in politics, which sees political equality as sufficiently guaranteed by the procedures of one person, one vote. They also challenge the more standard radical alternative, which has focused attention on prior economic or social change. Whatever their differences on other issues, the traditions of revolutionary Marxism and welfare state social reform have tended to converge on a broadly materialist analysis of the problems of political equality, seeing equal political access as something that depends on more fundamental changes in social, economic, and sometimes educational conditions. The current interest in achieving equal or proportionate presence reverses this, focusing instead on institutional mechanisms—its critics would say 'political fixes'—that can achieve more immediate change.

The roots of this reversal lie partly in frustration with what has proved an unbelievably slow process of structural transformation. But political frustration is not new, and people do not normally change direction just because things take so long. The additional impetus comes from the kind of concerns already outlined, which suggest that the range

of political ideas and preferences is significantly constrained by the characteristics of the people who convey them. In a more traditional base#superstructure model, we were advised to concentrate first on generating the social conditions for equal citizenship, then to enjoy the political equalization that flows from this. Such an approach treats policy choices as more straightforward than they really are, underestimating the extent to which strategies (even those devised for equality) will reflect the limits of those currently in power. When policies are worked out *for* rather than *with* a politically excluded constituency, they are unlikely to engage with all relevant concerns.

(p. 14) III

Though the importance attached to political presence is a relatively recent phenomenon, there are a number of precursors in the literature of political science which have addressed the political representation of non#class difference. The most influential of these is associated with Arendt Lijphart's theory of consociational or consensual democracy, which focuses on societies divided along a religious or linguistic axis, often both. In such contexts, Lijphart argues, 'majority rule is not only undemocratic but also dangerous, because minorities that are continually denied access to power will feel excluded and discriminated against and will lose their allegiance to the regime'.²⁰ The defining characteristic of the alternative consensual democracies is that they will distribute executive power and economic resources in proportion to the size of the different communities. It goes without saying that their electoral systems will follow principles of proportional representation, thereby ensuring that political parties are represented in the legislature in proportion to their overall electoral support. More significantly and uniquely, consociational democracies will also establish some element of power#sharing at executive level (a cabinet, for example, composed of leading figures from all the leading parties); will make some provision for minority veto over those issues that are most socially divisive; and will aim at the proportionate distribution of public funds or positions in the civil service between the constituent communities.

In the theorization of these developments, the emphasis is less on what is just and more on what is necessary, with the imperatives of political order always claiming the last word in deciding which forms of democracy are most appropriate. Not that issues of democratic equity are entirely absent: Lijphart repeatedly stresses the unfairness of majoritarianism when it is applied to plural societies, and sees the winner#takes#all practice of simple majority rule as both dangerous *and* undemocratic. The unfairness, however, is always perceived in rhythmic connection with pragmatic considerations of stability, and this limits the range of issues that Lijphart addresses. Consociationalism has most to say about those cleavages that translate into distinct political parties—where Calvinists and Catholics, (p. 15) for example, vote for different parties—and it has proved itself less adept in responding to the later demands for political inclusion.²¹

To be recognized as a serious candidate for power-sharing, a group must not only have a strong sense of itself and its interests; it must form its own political party as well. (It would also help if its existence posed a threat to national unity.)

In the relatively rare conditions where women, for example, form their own distinct political party, they might be able to appeal to principles of consociational democracy as a basis for their political claims. Even then they might be unlucky, for no one really expects women to secede. The question Lijphart sets himself is how 'to achieve and maintain stable democratic government in a plural society', ²² and this inevitably focuses his attention on group divisions that are already activated in politics, preferably in party political guise. This barely touches on more recent formulations of political exclusion, where the groups in question are unlikely to form their own parties, and may not yet be organized as significant and powerful blocs. Because consociationalism conceives of pluralism in terms of a division between 'virtually separate subsocieties', ²³ it does not deal with the corrosive consequences of marginalization or powerlessness, and the way these can inhibit the self-organization of groups defined outside the dominant norm. The most marginalized can be as marginal in a consociational democracy as they are anywhere else. Neither the theory nor the practice is about equalizing democratic weight.

Theorists of consociationalism have also been less concerned with whether members of one group can *in principle* represent members of another (can a Calvinist speak for a Catholic?) and more consistently focused on the empirical observation that they do not. The corollary of this is that theorists of consociationalism tend to be (p. 16) somewhat cavalier about the basis on which group leaders claim to represent 'their' group, and have explicitly condoned the behind-the-scenes manoeuvrings in which the various leaders reach their amicable agreements. The most favourable conditions for a stable consociational democracy are those in which the spokespeople for each segment have relatively unchallenged authority—and indeed, in Lijphart's first analysis of the politics of accommodation in the Netherlands, he saw the deferential nature of the political culture as an important ingredient in its success. ²⁴ Commenting on the limited applicability of this model to divisions based around racial or ethnic identity, Brian Barry has noted that these latter are far less likely to throw up a single unquestioned authority with the recognized right to speak for the group. ²⁵ Where communities are organized around religious, or even class, lines of division, leaders can more readily claim an authority over their supporters based on their superior knowledge of group interests and needs. When a group is defined around what each member may perceive as transparently obvious grievances and solutions, this is more likely to generate a number of contested alternatives, and no agreed leaders or élite. The question of who has the legitimacy to speak for or on behalf of the group is then more inherently contested—and consociationalism hardly addresses this issue.

IV

Questions of group difference have also entered into the domain of more normative political theory, where the central preoccupation has been how to be genuinely even-handed between what may be incompatible cultures or traditions or world-views. This is a problem that looms particularly large in contemporary liberalism, for most liberals have taken pride in an overarching neutrality between different conceptions of the good, and they have been acutely sensitive to accusations that this smuggles in a preference for one good over another. The politics associated with group difference is then widely discussed (or has come to be so, in the course of the last (p. 17) decade), with emphasis on the relationship between individual freedom and the rights of minority groups. Working from a self-consciously liberal tradition, both Will Kymlicka and Joseph Raz have endorsed a multicultural recognition of group rights to sustain group difference, and both have presented this as implied by liberal principles of freedom and autonomy.²⁶ Liberalism cannot confine itself to an exclusively individualist framework, for the very importance that liberals attach to free and autonomous choice is undermined if there is no associated respect for the different cultures in which people become free. Kymlicka has developed his arguments primarily in relation to indigenous peoples, and he distinguishes what he sees as their legitimate claims to group rights *vis-à-vis* the majority culture from the more contentious claims of free migrants. Raz is concerned more explicitly with multiculturalism, and his argument is buttressed by what he sees as the necessary pluralism of virtues and values, which can never be combined in a single life. To give one of his simple and compelling examples, no single person can simultaneously embody the crucial qualities that make a good chairperson, which include the ability to reconcile different points of view, with the eminently desirable attributes of an advocate, which include single-minded dedication to a cause.²⁷ In this, as in more complex examples, the representation of diversity is not just a sensible accommodation to the requirements of political stability. It reflects a more humbling recognition that no one group has a monopoly on virtue.

Kymlicka then stresses the importance of 'cultural context' in making options available to people, and appeals to this as a basis for group-differentiated rights that will help sustain threatened minority cultures. Raz argues that 'individual freedom and prosperity depend on full and unimpeded membership in a respected and flourishing cultural group',²⁸ and he sees this as a basis for policies that might range from the right of parents to ensure the education of their children within their own culture, to the public support for autonomous cultural institutions. Neither theorist, it should be (p. 18) noted, is promoting what might be described as an 'anything-goes' moral relativism. The argument depends ultimately on the overriding values of freedom and autonomy, and this sets limits to the tolerance of cultural practices or norms. Raz's respect for different cultures is always conditional: one key condition is that all cultures must

practice mutual tolerance and respect; another is the 'right of individuals to abandon their cultural group'.²⁹ Will Kymlicka's conditions are most commonly defined by the requirements of sexual equality—an issue that has become particularly central to these discussions.

The questions then revolve around the relationship between individual and group rights, and the relationship between liberal and illiberal cultures. How, for example, should a liberal democracy deal with groups whose own framework of beliefs is not particularly liberal? If groups are to be strengthened against the pressures that otherwise threaten their disintegration, this potentially strengthens their power over what they may see as recalcitrant members. What then protects the dissident individual, or guarantees her right of exit?³⁰ What kinds of rights or freedoms or autonomies can be built into the basic consensus of a society and required of all constituent communities? How are these to be justified if they appeal to principles that are not universally shared?

John Rawls's recent work deals extensively with such questions, but what is notable is the way he translates them into yet another version of the politics of competing ideas. The problem he sets himself in *Political Liberalism* is the diversity of 'reasonable comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines'³¹ (note the emphasis on doctrines), the crucial point being that each of these doctrines can be both comprehensive and reasonable, and that there is no legitimate basis for writing only one of them into the constitution of the state. The task, then, is to establish that 'overlapping consensus' around principles of fairness and justice that all reasonable doctrines can reasonably agree. Rawls notes that his discussion of (p. 19) this might be thought to overemphasize older controversies over religious toleration that arose in the context of the Reformation, and not to engage fully enough with what he terms 'our most basic problems'³² of race, ethnicity, and gender. He trusts, however, 'that once we get the conception and principles right for the basic historical questions, these conceptions and principles should be widely applicable to our own problems too'.³³ The comment is a rather startling reminder that Rawls conceives of difference primarily in terms of doctrine or belief, and that he has reformulated what are often demands for political presence into a conundrum of fairness and justice.

That said, Rawls is very much concerned with issues of difference, and in particular with the way that differences in power and perspective can distort political judgements. In his initial resolution of this, he envisaged our achieving the necessary evenhandedness through an act of imagination: we would think what kind of principles we could all freely accept if none of us knew our own likely position in the social hierarchy, or what we would come most to value as the good things in life. The famous 'veil of ignorance' would remove vested interests from the picture, for if we did not yet know our own likely position or beliefs, we would have no vested interests to defend. If we did not know,

for example, whether we were going to end up as atheists or Muslims or Catholics, we would almost certainly go for some principle of religious toleration, or some separation between religion and politics, that we could make compatible with whichever we came to be. We would then come to see tolerance not just as a necessary evil (or what Rawls later calls a 'modus vivendi'), but as a crucial component in a just society.

In this framework, it would be a nonsense to argue for the proportional representation of atheists and Muslims and Catholics in the decision-making assembly: that would defeat the whole logic of the position, which is based on the power of not yet knowing which we might be. So when Rawls later talks of the 'proper representation' of the point of view of free and equal citizens, ³⁴ he does not at all mean that there should be a rough equality of representation between the different groups that make up the society. Indeed, the parties who get together to agree the founding principles of the (p. 20) society are not expected to know the content of all the different conceptions of the good that are going to exist within the society, and it would block them in their deliberations if they did. The emphasis is on how to achieve an original constitution that can be demonstrably even-handed and fair; a set of principles that will allow all these 'properly represented' citizens to pursue their as yet unspecified (except permissible) doctrines. If the composition of the founding assembly were deliberately rigged to exclude certain groups, this would presumably count as an illegitimate intrusion of vested interest. But other than that, it is the suspension of knowledge that guarantees equity of treatment, not the presence of all social groups.

The relationship between democracy and justice is, of course, perennially troubled, and even if we believe that a more democratically constituted assembly will reach more just decisions (because it is less open to favouritism and bias), we could hardly be confident that all its decisions will be just. Majoritarianism is notoriously prone to injustice, particularly where there are permanent majorities, ³⁵ and even when additional safeguards have been built in to protect numerical minorities, the mechanisms of democracy never guarantee the quality of the outcomes. My point, then, is not that explorations of justice are inappropriate if they proceed in isolation from institutional arrangements, or that there is no more work to be done on the normative principles that should regulate relationships between different groups. But recent political theory has offered far more interesting material on the content of policy decisions (what kinds of decisions are just?) than on the processes through which these are reached. As Iris Young has argued, the preoccupation with end-state distributions then tends to ignore the power relations that underpin decision-making arrangements. ³⁶

Young's work is one major exception to this, and her own exploration of *Justice and the Politics of Difference* has put issues of group representation more firmly on the political agenda. She takes issue with the naivety of those who think that even-handed

principles of justice can emerge through some extraordinary act of imagination; she goes, indeed, considerably further than this, to query the very status and value of impartiality. A democratic public, she argues, (p. 21) 'should provide mechanisms for the effective recognition and representation of the distinct voices and perspectives of those of its constituent groups that are oppressed and disadvantaged'; ³⁷ failing such mechanisms, the policy outcomes will almost inevitably reflect the preconceptions of the dominant groups. Young has been concerned mainly with the role of oppressed social groups in the formation of public policy (their right, for example, to generate policy proposals which the decision makers would then be required to take into account), or with their guaranteed access, as members of specific social groups, to some future deliberative assembly; ³⁸ she has not, on the whole, been much interested in modifying the composition of existing élites. As will become clear in Chapter 2, I differ from her in my characterization of the politics of presence, and do not see this as based on any strong notion of 'group representation'. But Young is still the main exception to what is otherwise the dominant trend in normative political theory, where the problems associated with group difference have been conceived primarily in terms of the fair and evenhanded principles that should regulate relationships between different groups. Questions of voice or effective power have been far less fully addressed. ³⁹

V

The notion that fair representation implies proportionate representation according to social characteristics such as ethnicity or gender is a controversial one, and indeed in many ways it is more controversial than its supporters like to suggest. The underrepresentation of certain categories of people is often so stark that its injustice seems beyond question. When women, for example, occupy a mere 5 per cent of the seats in a legislative assembly, one need only reverse the position of the sexes to demonstrate the democratic deficit. What would men think of a legislature where they were outnumbered nineteen to one? Most wellintentioned observers can be brought to (p. 22) acknowledge a problem of underrepresentation, to accept that there is something unsatisfactory in current political arrangements, and in the way assemblies are monopolized by a limited range of people or perspectives. And, once offered a modest range of reforms that would enable more women or more people from ethnic minorities to put themselves forward as political candidates, most of these wellintentioned observers will be happy to give their support.

When the stakes are raised, however, to include more decisive guarantees of political presence, the potential backing often drops away. This is not only (though it may also be) a matter of intellectual dishonesty, for what most good democrats would like is a way of dealing with political exclusion that does not give too much credibility to the group basis on which people are excluded. Where societies are already divided

between competing and exclusionary groups, many will accept—just as a matter of pragmatic necessity—that each of these groups has to be accorded some proportionate representation, or that some form of power-sharing is required. But the fear of encouraging exclusionary and fragmented identities is particularly acute in the wake of the destructive nationalisms of post-communist Europe, and these same people may recoil from strategies that threaten to introduce or intensify divisions that are not yet so serious. Democracies have stumbled along for many decades without addressing the gender or ethnic composition of elected assemblies, and making sex or ethnicity a serious matter of political contestation might then be thought to generate divisions that have not yet proved so deep. Concerns for political stability have been the driving force behind many consociational proposals for power-sharing; the very same concerns can be equally well wielded *against* a politics of presence.

One common objection, then, is that basing politics around differences of ethnicity or race or gender tends to a 'balkanization' of the polity that undermines social alliance or social cohesion. One of the strengths of the more conventional politics of ideas is that it encourages citizens to focus their attention on the policy differences that divide them. These divisions may themselves be intransigent, but at least they cut across those other axes of division by race or gender or ethnicity, and thereby help secure alliances across different groups. Men can join forces with women to promote policies of sexual equality; white people can join forces with black people to (p. 23) eradicate racial discrimination; Catholics can join forces with Muslims to secure conditions for religious toleration. Too much emphasis on group difference threatens to propel the citizens out of this realm of unifying ideas, and the prospects for cross-group co-operation then become more bleak. A politics that gives increased weight to social identities may block the very alliances that are necessary for change.

The radical resistance to identity-based politics is often expressed in these terms. It surfaces, for example, in arguments over the leadership of anti-racist organizations, and over whether insisting on an all-black executive will damage the conditions for multi-racial action; it also surfaces in the perennial objections from certain groups of socialists to any autonomous organization by women. A more conservative version stresses the potential threat to national unity when too much weight is given to sub-national forms of identity. This runs through critiques of the 'hyphenated identities' that have flourished in American politics; it also underpins the surprisingly strong resistance of the French educational authorities when Muslim schoolgirls expressed their relatively modest wish to cover their heads in class. It is tempting to respond to such anxieties by saying that identity-based politics already exists; that it is hardly relevant whether we approve it, for it is here whether we like it or not. But since the point of this book is to explore changes in the nature of political representation that would further enhance the significance of race or ethnicity or gender, this is hardly enough of an answer. The

politics of presence does attach substantially more weight to group difference than is allowed in the politics of ideas, and the potential consequences of this have to be taken into account.

A second major objection is that making representation even partially dependent on personal or group characteristics seems to undermine the basis for political accountability. Most of us can get to grips with the idea that representatives represent us because of a congruity in political opinions or beliefs, and, however disenchanted we may have become with existing mechanisms of accountability, we have some general sense of how this can or should be developed. What are the comparable mechanisms of accountability through which we can see our representatives as 'representing' us in our capacity as women, or as members of an ethnic or racial minority? Does this move rely on an implausible essentialism which presumes (p. 24) that all women have identical interests, or that all black people think the same way? And if not, in what sense are we more fairly represented when we see our representatives as more like ourselves? Accountability is always the other side of the coin in any discussion of representation, and it is hard to conceive of accountability except in terms of policies and programmes and ideas. What then is added by an additional insistence on equal numbers of women and men, or a fairer balance between ethnic groups?

A third objection comes from those who have queried the sordid self-interest of a politics that merely aggregates votes, and have looked to a more deliberative democracy that could generate genuinely common concerns. Superficially, at least, the politics of presence is at odds with what have been major developments in recent political theory: the revival of civic republicanism; the theorization of deliberative or communicative democracy; the renewed attack on interest group politics. Cynthia Ward, for one, insists that group-based remedies and civic republicanism do not mix; that giving added legitimacy to groups acts 'like a corrosive on metal, eating away at the ties of connectedness that bind us together as a nation';⁴⁰ and that any serious critic of interest group factionalism should reject the 'group-think' implied in this approach. What is most interesting, however, is that she has to argue this against what she perceives as a dangerous accommodation between the ideals of civic republicanism and the practice of group representation. Despite the superficial tension, those engaged in the revival of civic republicanism or the exploration of deliberative democracy have not set themselves in total opposition to any politics of presence; indeed, in the work of Iris Young and Cass Sunstein, there has been an explicit incorporation of principles of group representation into the framework of deliberative or communicative democracy.⁴¹

In subsequent chapters I explore these and other objections, all of which get a good run for their money, though none of them proves decisive. The cumulative effect, however, is to strengthen what is the central thesis of this book: that, while the politics of ideas is an

inadequate (p. 25) vehicle for dealing with political exclusion, there is little to be gained by simply switching to a politics of presence. Taken in isolation, the weaknesses of the one are as dramatic as the failings of the other. Most of the problems, indeed, arise when these two are set up as exclusionary opposites: when ideas are treated as totally separate from the people who carry them; or when the people dominate attention, with no thought given to their policies and ideas. It is in the relationship between ideas and presence that we can best hope to find a fairer system of representation, not in a false opposition between one or the other.

The preliminary task, of course, is to establish the normative basis for any kind of politics of presence. My comments so far have merely set the scene, describing the development of a new politics around presence, indicating its potential divergence from a more established politics of ideas, suggesting that it carries with it a different understanding of representation. None of these yet establishes a case, for what happens rarely coincides with what we want, and even less so with what is just or right. Chapter 2, then, looks at the normative arguments that can be deployed to defend this development, beginning with the possibility that it is required by the key principles of popular control and political equality, but moving beyond this to an alternative justification grounded in existing structures of exclusion. I identify four key arguments, which can be briefly summarized in terms of the importance of symbolic representation, the need to tackle those exclusions that are inherent in the party#packaging of political ideas, the need for more vigorous advocacy on behalf of disadvantaged groups, and the importance of a politics of transformation in opening up the full range of policy options.

Chapter 3 and 4 then explore these normative issues in relation to two major contemporary developments that have invoked a politics of presence: the pursuit of a guaranteed proportion of women among the candidates chosen by political parties; and the pursuit of guaranteed election for minority representatives through redistricting arrangements in the USA. Chapter 5 turns to the complex and multi#layered politics of inclusion that characterizes contemporary Canada, where claims to political presence jostle alongside demands for minority self#government. In this context, the political aspirations of minority or disadvantaged groups seem to point in very different directions, with some looking to a fuller degree of (p. 26) participation in the central decision#making bodies, and others seeking greater autonomy from the central legislature. The politics of presence appears relevant only to one of these demands.

Chapter 6 returns to a more substantial discussion of the relationship between equal or proportionate presence and the growing literature on deliberative democracy. Finally, Chapter 7 pulls together the remaining loose ends in the argument (not always to my entire satisfaction), and places the argument for political presence in the context of

larger ambitions for a revitalized democracy. It should be understood throughout that my arguments are not intended as the only recipe for democratic change, for while I regard the exclusion of minority or disadvantaged groups as a particularly damaging failure, I do not expect the resolution of this to deliver everything we could possibly require.

Notes:

- (1) Novels and essays by Chinua Achebe, for example, or Wole Soyinka.
- (2) J. Burnheim, *Is Democracy Possible?* (Cambridge, 1985).
- (3) E. Callenbach, and M. Phillips, *A Citizen Legislature* (Berkeley, 1985).
- (4) For a more general discussion of the lottery principle, see B. Goodwin, *Justice By Lottery* (London, 1992).
- (5) J. Fishkin, *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform* (New Haven, 1991).
- (6) For an earlier discussion of this, see J. Abramson, 'The Jury and Democratic Theory', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 1/1 (1993).
- (7) H. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley, 1967), 226.
- (8) H. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley, 1967), 209.
- (9) Ibid. 233.
- (10) R. Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics* (New Haven, 1989).
- (11) G. Kateb, 'The Moral Distinctiveness of Representative Democracy', *Ethics*, 91/3 (1981), 361.
- (12) S. Rowbotham, 'The Women's Movement and Organising for Socialism', in S. Rowbotham, L. Segal, and H. Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism* (London, 1979) 61.
- (13) K. B. Jones, *Compassionate Authority: Democracy and the Representation of Women* (New York, 1993).

- (14) D. Stasiulis, ' "Authentic Voice": Anti#Racist Politics in Canadian Feminist Publishing and Literary Production', in S. Gunew, and A. Yeat man (eds.), *Feminism and the Politics of Difference* (Sydney, 1993).
- (15) A. Yeat man, 'Voice and Representation in the Politics of Difference', in Gunew and Yeat man, *Feminism*, 241.
- (16) S. Castles and M. J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (Basingstoke, 1993), 8.
- (17) C. Taylor, 'Shared and Divergent Values', in R. L. Watts and D. M. Brown (eds.), *Options for a New Canada* (Toronto, 1991), 54.
- (18) Castles and Miller, *Age of Migration*, 273.
- (19) Rawls does not present it in these terms, but Joshua Cohen makes a good case for considering the difference principle as required by the democratic conception: J. Cohen, 'Democratic Equality', *Ethics*, 99 (1989).
- (20) A. Lijphart, *Democracies: Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty#one Countries* (New Haven, 1984), 22–3.
- (21) One qualification to this is that Belgium and the Netherlands—both cited as examples of consociational democracy, and both com mitted to the proportionate distribution of public funds between different religious com munities—proved themselves more ready to address the subsequent claims of Muslim com munities than did Britain. See J. Rath, K. Groenendijk, and R. Pennint, 'The Recognition and Institutionalisation of Islam in Belgium, Great Britain, and the Netherlands', *New Com munity*, 18/1 (1991).
- (22) A. Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven, 1977), 1.
- (23) Ibid. 22.
- (24) A. Lijphart, *The Politics of Accommodation: Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands* (Berkeley, 1968).
- (25) B. Barry, 'Political Accommodation and Consociational Democracy', *British Journal of Political Science* 5/4 (1975).

(26) W. Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture* (Oxford, 1989) and *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford, 1995); J. Raz, 'Multiculturalism: A Liberal Perspective', *Dissent* (Winter, 1994).

(27) J. Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford, 1986), 404.

(28) Raz, 'Multiculturalism', 72.

(29) Raz, 'Multiculturalism', 73.

(30) See C. Kukathas, 'Are There Any Cultural Rights?' *Political Theory*, 20/1 (1992); W. Kymlicka, 'The Rights of Minority Cultures: Reply to Kukathas', *Political Theory*, 20/1 (1992); and C. Kukathas, 'Cultural Rights Again: A Rejoinder to Kymlicka', *Political Theory*, 20/4 (1992), for a debate on right of exit.

(31) J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York, 1993), 36.

(32) Ibid. xxviii.

(33) Ibid. xxix.

(34) Ibid. 115–16.

(35) L. Guinier, *The Tyranny of the Majority: Fundamental Fairness in Representative Democracy* (New York, 1994), especially ch. 1.

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

(37) Ibid. 184.

(38) She focuses on the first in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*; on the second in I. M. Young, 'Justice and Communicative Democracy', in R. Gottlieb (ed.), *Tradition, Counter#Tradition, Politics: Dimensions of Radical Philosophy* (Philadelphia, 1994).

(39) Will Kymlicka is a further exception to this; see his exploration of the politics of group representation in *Multicultural Citizenship*, ch. 7.

(40) C. V. Ward, 'The Limits of "Liberal Republicanism": Why Group#Based Remedies and Republican Citizenship Don't Mix', *Columbia Law Review*, 91/3 (1991), 598.

(41) C. Sunstein, 'Preferences and Politics', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 20/1 (1991); Young, 'Justice and Communicative Democracy'.

