

# New forms of democratic empowerment: Introducing user influence in the primary school system in Denmark

Eva Sørensen

## Introduction

In the last 25 years the political system in Denmark has been subject to widespread decentralization. The purpose of this process of decentralization has been to increase the flexibility of public governance in order to increase both governance efficiency and the influence of users of public services on the nature of these services. While most people involved in processes of public governance tend to agree that decentralization in most areas has served to increase governance efficiency, a heated debate has taken place among politicians and social scientists about the compatibility of increased user influence and liberal democracy (Andersen and Hoff, 1997; Eriksen and Weigård, 1993; Haarder, 1993; Nyseth and Torpe, 1997; Sørensen, 1995). Although there is general agreement that increased user influence is an important means of empowering citizens in relation to public authorities there is more doubt as to whether it is a democratic form of empowerment. Supporters of increased user influence stress its value as a means of developing a more participatory democracy than is the case in the traditional institutions of representative democracy. In contrast, those who speak against user influence underline two dangers for democracy: that it enhances a particularistic perspective on policy-making at the cost of a universal perspective oriented towards the governing of society as such; and that it undermines the institutionalized borderline between the sphere of collective rule and the sphere of individuality so fundamental to liberal democracy. The undermining of this borderline is said by some to endanger the existence of space for individual freedom while others point to the danger which it means for ensuring political equality. These values – individual freedom and political equality – represent the basic normative foundation of liberal democracy.

The aim of this article is to argue that both of these dangers are relevant but manageable. I shall argue that if they are avoided the enhancement of user influence stands a fair chance of becoming a major ingredient in that reformation of institutions of liberal democracy which is absolutely necessary as modern society changes into postmodern society. In order to make this argument

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we must initially take a look at the setting in which increased user influence has been introduced e.g. a radical process of decentralization in Denmark.

### **Decentralization in Denmark**

It should be noted that the political system in Denmark has traditionally been highly decentralized compared to most North European countries. Hence, municipalities have always played a central part in processes of public governance. For instance Danish municipalities have collected taxes since 1903. So when the process of decentralization gained speed in 1970, municipalities already had a relatively high level of autonomy.

It is possible to distinguish three separate waves of decentralization. The first wave was the decentralization of a number of governing tasks from state to municipalities. This wave was initiated with the huge reform of municipal governance of 1970 (Kommunalreformen) which at one and the same time increased the size of municipalities and gave them considerable political and financial autonomy within limits set by the state. The guiding principle of this reform was to create sustainable municipalities (Bent Schou, 1994). From 1970 up till the present day this process of decentralization has continued. The policy areas which have been most heavily decentralized are social policies and the primary school system.

The second wave of decentralization gained speed in the 1980s. It involved the decentralization of government tasks and decision-making competence from municipalities to self governing public institutions. Hence, a wide range of public institutions such as nursery homes, old people's homes, primary schools, libraries, etc. have become self-governing within financial and political limits set by the Municipality Council. Each institution is now governed by a user board elected by all users of the institution. The user board has the competence to decide the overall principles for the governing of the institution while the actual governing is performed by an administrative leader. In that sense the system of governance within the institutions is a microcopy of the distribution of competence between politicians and administration in state and municipalities. And so the second wave of decentralization has produced yet another level of governance within the political system. But it has done more than that. The introduction of user boards has been accompanied by increased freedom of choice for the users between services produced by different public institutions. Since the ability of institutions to attract users has become a central parameter for the size of municipal funding the second wave of decentralization has introduced demand-supply mechanisms and competition into the sphere of public governance (Sørensen, 1995: ch. 6).

The third wave of decentralization, which began to roll at the end of the 1980s and onwards, is the increasing cooperation between state/municipality and organizations within civil society such as firms and voluntary organizations. This cooperation has resulted in the development of a grey zone of governance (Greve, 1998) which is both public and private in the sense that both the pur-

pose and the means of governance are mixed due to the fact that the involved institutions participate for different reasons. Firms are in it for profit, states and municipalities seek to increase governance efficiency and obtain legitimacy, while voluntary organizations focus on the ability to solve defined problems. Cooperation between voluntary organizations and public authorities is mostly found in the social sector whereas cooperation between public authorities and private firms take place in areas such as transportation, cleaning and food production.

To sum up so far all three waves of decentralization challenge the traditional institutions of liberal democracy in different ways. The first wave of decentralization from state to municipalities remains more or less within the logic of traditional institutions of representative democracy. It is what could be described as the constitution of representative democracy within a representative democracy. A Chinese box representative democracy. This development challenges the notion that the nation state is one uncontested territorial unit. In comparison the second and third waves of decentralization are much more radical in that they both tend to go against some basic principles of representative democracy. The second wave challenges traditional institutions of liberal democracy in three ways: by adding yet another box – the institution – to the Chinese box system; by introducing a functional in stead of a territorial basis of representation; and by introducing a new form of political empowerment which is quite different from citizen empowerment. The second wave brings with it two new forms of empowerment: the exit-influence which freedom of choice between public service producers gives and the voice-influence of elected user representation in user boards. The third wave of decentralization is radical in the sense that the spending of public money by private organizations seriously limits the level of public control. This limitation of public control is in conflict with the claim for democratic control with all public activities.

The objective of this article – to examine the relationship between user influence and liberal democracy – directs our attention towards the second wave of decentralization. However, it should be noticed that increased decentralization from state to municipalities (the first wave) is a precondition for the institutionalization of substantial user influence in public institutions. Hence, decentralization directly from state to institutions would institutionalize a distance between politicians and users which would be hard to bridge. This could be fatal since continuous and close dialogue between politicians and users is essential for the enhancement of both democratic empowerment and governance efficiency. It enhances democratic empowerment because dialogue improves the level of knowledge of politicians about the viewpoints and concerns of citizens. And it enhances governance efficiency because it serves to coordinate decision-making and concrete problem solving. Therefore, the value of user influence in autonomous public institutions depends on the presence of widespread municipal autonomy. While I consider the first and second wave of decentralization as central ingredients in the institutionalization of increased user influence I am somewhat puzzled about the possible consequences of the

third wave for democratic empowerment. I sympathize with the basic idea behind this strategy of empowerment that civil society must play a more active part in processes of societal governance than has been the case in traditional institutions of liberal democracy. And I find great value in the institutionalization of a space of publicly financed experimenting with alternative methods of solving publicly defined tasks. Hence, the value of for example publicly financed private schools and voluntary organizations doing social work for the refinement of methods of public governance in Denmark cannot be exaggerated. However, private-public cooperation as institutionalized in the third wave of decentralization, seriously limits the possibility of democratic control. For that reason the institutionalization of such cooperation is not acceptable as a general strategy of democratic empowerment as proposed by Hirst (1994). Instead of moving governing tasks from public institutions to civil society a strategy of empowerment must introduce institutions of public governance which invites actors within civil society to take an active part in processes of governance within the public sector. The second wave of decentralization represents one way of doing this by institutionalizing channels of influence for users on public services. In what follows we shall take a closer look at the way such channels of influence has been institutionalized in the primary school system in Denmark.

### **User influence in the primary school system<sup>1</sup>**

The primary school system in Denmark is dominated by publicly governed schools. Hence, a mere 10% of all pupils attend private schools (approximately 70% of expenses are publicly funded). This dominating position of public schools has long historical roots that go as far back as 1708 when the first public schools were established.

From the very first the primary school system was split into two. While the management of finances took place at the local community level (the parish), substantive governance was performed by the church. The hierarchical character of the church system meant that substantive governing of the public schools was institutionalized in a highly centralized structure.<sup>2</sup> This early organizational division of financial and substantial aspects of school governance between the local notables and the church lasted well into this century. It left very little room for self-governance in the individual schools. However, from the beginning of this century it is possible to identify a slow but steady change in the primary school system. This change follows two lines. One line is a slow process of decentralization of public school governance made possible by a gradual separation of the educational system from the church. This process received an initial boost in 1916 when the Ministry of Education was separated from the Ministry of the Church. Nevertheless, it took a few more years before the last remnants of direct church influence were removed. Not until 1933 did elected politicians obtain a majority of the seats in the School Directory, the main governing body for the schools. This process of decentralization has

gradually increased the autonomy of the individual school. The first School Commissions of 1814—the governing body for schools in the local community—had no representatives from the schools—no school heads, teachers or parents. The first big step towards the integration of schools into the governing process was taken in 1904 when school heads and the Teachers' Councils obtained the right to be heard in the School Commission. A second steady line of development is an increase in the degree of formal parental influence in the governing process. In 1933 parents were given the right to form a Parents' Council at each school and to apply for representation on the School Commission. In Copenhagen the establishment of a School Council at each school with teachers, parents and the school head was made obligatory in 1949. The rest of the country followed in 1970.

Both of these lines of development were continued in a most radical way with the reform of primary school governance in 1990. For the first time parents have obtained a level of decision-making competence which gives them the formal right to make a considerable difference in the governing process. First, the reform decentralizes decision-making competence regarding substantial aspects even further from state to municipalities and from municipalities to the individual school. And so, today it is possible for the individual school to develop its own profile within a wide substantial framework. However, the main aspects of financial governance is still decided by the municipality council just as the hiring and firing of staff remains a municipal task. All in all, the autonomy regarding substance has become considerably larger than the financial autonomy. Though the general tendency is decentralization the reform includes one element of centralization—the removal of the School Commission. The price for increased institutional autonomy has been a loss of user influence on municipal school governance. Second, the decision-making competence was divided between a user board with a majority of parents (exchanging the relatively weak School Council) and the school leader. The school board (the parents) have the competence to decide on all matters of principle while the school leader governs with reference to these principles.

In 1986 the general trend towards institutional autonomy and increased parental influence was supplemented by another important change carrying considerable implications for the structuring of the Danish school system. Traditionally, parents' possibilities for choosing between public schools was very limited. Every school had its district, and parents to children within this district had to present very good reasons to be permitted to choose another public (state) school. If parents did not want their child to attend the public school for which s/he was eligible, there was no option but to choose a private school. However, the 1986 revision of the School Governance Act, introduced a limited freedom of choice between schools: parents were allowed to choose an alternative public school if there was room once all the children in the school district were admitted.

Thus the system of public school governance today has institutionalized formal channels for considerable parental influence on the governing of the individual school and some freedom of choice between public schools. The cost of

this has been the removal of formal channels of parental influence on municipal school governance. And so the system of public school governance has developed into a two level-system of governance with a very weak link between them: an institutional level governed by the parents and the school leader and a municipal level governed by the municipal politicians and administrators.

### **Parental influence and democratic empowerment**

When analyzed in an empowerment perspective two arguments can be made in favour of this development. First the increasing integration of parents in the governing process moving from a marginal position in advisory bodies of governance to a dominant position in powerful bodies could be described as steadily climbing the Arnheim ladder of participation (Ch. 2; Burns, 1994: 162). Within this logic the 1990 reform could be described as a movement from user-participation to user-control. Second, the form which this increase in formalized parental influence has been given is well in line with the propositions made by Hirschman in his advocacy for a balancing of exit and voice channels of influence (Hirschman, 1970: ch. 9). Hirschman argues that the optimal balancing of exit- and voice-options is limited access to exit and easy access to voice. The limited exit option makes it possible to exit if the outcome of collective rule is intolerable while the easy access to voice channels of influence serves to direct resources among the users into improving the quality of the outcome.<sup>3</sup> This balance between exit and voice is exactly what has been institutionalized with school boards granting users considerable voice-influence on the governing of the individual school and exit-influence through a limited freedom of choice between schools.

Therefore, the question is not whether the development of institutions of public school governance empowers parents. They do. The question which has to be considered is whether this form of empowerment is democratic. Answering this question involves detailed consideration of the two problematics mentioned in the introduction to this article. These discussions concern the relationship between individualism and collectivism and the relationship between particularism and universalism in democratic thought.

### **Individualism and collectivism**

Many analysts of societal change have pointed to the evaporation of the institutionalized borderline between public and private which increased user influence brings with it as a serious threat to liberal democracy. Although for different reasons. Liberalists have argued that the introduction of voice-based forms of user influence leads to a totalization of society due to a spread of collective action at the cost of the sphere of individual freedom (Haarder, 1990: 25). More collectively oriented debaters have in return argued that an increase in exit-based user influence leads to an atomization of society because it leads

to a strengthening of individual action and an individualistic perspective at the cost of a collective perspective on democratic governance (Eriksen and Weigård, 1993: 123).

Though their reasons vary a great deal both positions seem to believe that liberal democracy calls for a clear cut separation of a private sphere – a civil society – based on individual freedom and a political sphere of collective rule. In opposition I shall argue that politics is not by nature the sphere of collectivism. That is, politics within liberal democracies has as one of its most important objectives the balancing of individualism and collectivism. This need for a balancing derives from a basic paradox in the very foundation of liberal democracy defined as “rule by the people”. The simultaneously plural and singular character of “the people” illustrates that democratic governance is at one and the same time “governance of all and of each” as Foucault puts it (Gordon, 1993: 3). And so the concern of democratic governance is both to totalize and to individualize (Gordon, 1993: 3). Therefore, what is at stake is not necessarily an institutional separation of collectivism and individualism in a public – private divide. This is merely the way traditional institutions of liberal democracy have balanced the paradox. Such a separation is no more than one out of several possible ways of balancing the totalizing and the individualizing ambitions of liberal democracy. Another way would be to institutionalize a balance between exit- and voice forms – individual and collective forms – of democratic empowerment in all areas of social life.

If we take a look at the way in which traditional institutions of liberal democracy balance exit and voice options the balance is institutionalized as a balance between a private sphere and a public sphere. While exit options dominate the private sphere, i.e. the economy, voice options dominate in the public sphere, i.e. politics. In traditional institutions of liberal democracy the voice option is institutionalized through voting, party membership and a free public debate. However, the exit-option is to some extent present in the public sector in the sense that the voter can abandon one party for another at general elections. But this form of exiting is of limited value since a clear cut exit demands that the individual is able to exit the consequences of collective rule. That calls for an exit from the nation state or at least from the municipality. The costs of such an exit are huge. In contrast to the public sector it is the defined task of the market economy to ensure individual freedom by means of the institutionalization of multiple exit options. Seen in this light the private sector is not located outside the political. It is a precondition for defining a voice dominated public sector a liberal democracy.

The second wave of decentralization – the autonomization of public institutions – points in the direction of the development of a pluralistic public sector. That is, a public sector in which a genuine exit is in fact possible. In a pluralistic public sector it becomes possible to institutionalize the necessary balance of collectivism and individualism in a new way. Not by balancing the size of the public sector against the size of the private sector but by balancing user exit against user voice within the public sector itself. The argument is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.

Forms of empowerment	Individual action	Collective action
Pluralistic public sector	1. User exit: – choice between institutions	2. User voice: – user boards
Traditional institutions of liberal democracy	3. Citizen exit: (– voting) – private sphere	4. Citizen voice: – voting – party membership – public debate

In my view, the pluralization of the public sector widens the possibilities of developing new forms of democratic empowerment considerably. For that reason I consider the present introduction of user influence in Denmark as an important step towards enhancing democratic empowerment within liberal democracies. However, before we can go into detail as to how user influence should be institutionalized we have to consider another critique raised against user influence as a means of democratic empowerment.

### User democracy is a threat to universalism

Some have argued that increased user influence represents a danger to democracy because it enhances particularism in political life at the cost of universalism (Eriksen and Weigård, 1993). They argue that the user role is radically different from the citizen role. While the latter is a genuine political role oriented towards the promotion of the common good for society as such the user role is private in its perspective since it is oriented towards the promotion of particular interests.

Actually, it is only particular interests which are formulated. It is those who are involved in an area of public governance who are allowed to make themselves heard and to promote their wishes without having to weigh these wishes against the wishes of others. For that reason active user participation in processes of public governance has clear parallels to corporate governance. (...) The interests maintain a private character. (Ibid. 124)

Consequently, increased user influence weakens democracy by transforming it into a privatized democracy in which efforts to promote universalism e.g. the common good for society as such is marginalized by the balancing of particular interests (Ibid. 123-4). Eriksen and Weigård seem to base this conclusion on the existence of a fundamental antagonism between the political sphere (the sphere of the common good) and the private sphere (the sphere of particular interest promotion). This antagonism calls for a sharp institutional separation of the public and the private in order to ensure a realm dominated by reasoned debate in which not the strongest, but the person with the best argument wins (Ibid. 124). Therefore, efforts to renew institutions of democratic governance must aim to establish the best possible framework for reasoned political debate.

Table 2.

Forms of empowerment	Individual action	Collective action
Particular perspective	1. User exit: – choice between institutions	2. User voice: – user boards
Universal perspective	3. Citizen exit: (– voting) – private sphere	4. Citizen voice: – voting – party membership – public debate

Not surprisingly, Eriksen and Weigård conclude that user influence does not add to the development of such institutions.

In summary the Eriksen/Weigård argument places user empowerment within square 1 and 2 and citizen empowerment within square 3 and 4 of table 2.

According to this line of thinking efforts to develop the institutions of liberal democracy must concentrate on developing forms of democratic empowerment which follow the logic of square 3 and 4.

Eriksen and Weigård's argument has an important weakness. They reduce the political to pure universalism (the identification of the common good). As a result of this reductionism they fail to see that the very essence of the political is the tension between particularism and universalism (Laclau, 1992: 89). Politics is *"the management of the incompleteness of society which derives from the constitutive split between the universal and the particular"* (Torfing, 1998: ch. 9). In line with this understanding of the nature of the political, democracy is when this tension between the universal and the particular is managed in accordance with democratic norms. One central democratic norm is that access to political empowerment should be distributed equally between all members of society. The existence of a constitutive split between the universal and the particular means that a pure universalism is an impossibility. Any claim for universalism must necessarily refer to a point outside society – be it a rational reason, or an overarching principle of justice – in order to obtain a universal status (Laclau, 1992: 84; Torfing, 1998: ch. 9). However, these points of reference are in fact no more than social constructs which have obtained a hegemonic position in society. In other words the universal is a particularism which has obtained hegemony. It is the hegemonization – or universalization – of a particularism which constitutes society as a unity – a community to which individuals can either belong or not belong (Ifersen, 1989: 33). Therefore, what is needed is a redefinition of the status of universalism from being defined as a pre socially founded fact to being the empty place which has to be filled in order to create societal unity (Laclau, 1992; Torfing, 1998: ch. 9). In accordance with this perception of the universal the political is conceived as the battle between particularisms over which one is to fill the empty place. However, the proposed reformulation of universalism affects our perception of particularism as well. Universalism defined as a hegemonized particularism points to a interrelatedness between universalism and particularism which rejects the exist-

ence of pure particularism. Hence, a central aspect in any strategy which aims to promote particular interests and viewpoints is to argue for their foundation in a universalism. This is most certainly true in political life.

In short the political is the battle between particularities for obtaining a universal status. And so a claim for democracy is a claim that this battle should be organized in a way which is in harmony with the principle of equal distribution of channels of empowerment for all members of society. Keeping this in mind some of the basic principles according to which the traditional institutions of liberal democracy have been organized must be surrendered. It makes no sense to institutionalize a sharp division between the universal and the particular. The two perspectives are per definition closely linked although this link is full of tension. They are like an old married couple who fight all the time but cannot live without each other. Accordingly, efforts could be used more constructively than seeking to develop institutional forms which ensure a sphere of pure universalism. Instead it should be invested in analyzing how actual institutions of public governance balances the relationship between them. Is the issue at stake the development of new channels of democratic empowerment? Then, specific attention should be directed towards the development of democratic institutions which promote that considerable pressure is placed upon individuals and groups to give their actions and views a universal foundation, and that the channels of empowerment which allow people to take part in the battle for hegemony are distributed equally.

This being said we must reject the idea that the political can be restricted to a specific sphere of society. Politics is in action every time individuals or groups need to legitimize their actions and viewpoints by referring to their foundation in universal norms and values. Such references are not only made in the traditional institutions of political life. They are also made in both family life and business life. However, recognizing that politics is found in all corners of society is not the same as concluding that everything is politics. Many activities both in the political system and in civil society are not explicitly legitimated with reference to a universal foundation. Just consider the vast quantity of routinized patterns of behaviour which take place for the simple reason that "this is what we always do". Such routinized activity takes place either because nobody ever raised the issue "why?" or because it is the result of a long gone battle for hegemony. A hegemony so strong and stable that those involved in the activity in question have long stopped asking why. While the former background for routinized behaviour is caused by a lack of politization of the action at hand the latter is the result of a sedimentation of former political battles. This sedimentation means that the activity loses its political nature.

Having now given up the idea that particularism and universalism can be institutionally separated we need to reconsider the organizing principles of the table presented above. What comes to mind is that the particular-universal dualism is in fact a cover up for a distinction between territorially and functionally based forms of democratic empowerment.

Table 3 directs our attention away from the universalism-particularism dichotomy as organizing principle for what is to be considered as the sphere of

Table 3.

Forms of empowerment	Individual action	Collective action
Functional principle of organization	1. User exit: – choice between institutions	2. User voice: – user boards
Territorial principle of organization	3. Citizen exit: (– voting) – private sphere	4. Citizen voice: – voting – party membership – public debate

the political – the sphere of democratic empowerment – vis a vis the private sphere. Instead it points to the fact that the battle between particularisms striving to obtain a universal status takes place in all four squares. That is, it envisages that the most urgent issue on the agenda is a clarification of how territorially and functionally organized forms of empowerment, respectively, condition this battle and how this conditioning coincides with the aspirations of democratic governance.

### **Territorially and functionally organized democracy**

Then, what are the values for democratic governance of territorially and functionally based forms of democratic empowerment? In order to answer this question we must once again point to a fundamental paradox within the concept of liberal democracy itself. As mentioned above the standard definition of democracy is “rule by the people”. But who are ‘the people’? The paradoxical nature of this question derives from the fact that “the people” is not a pregiven concept. It is a social construction which is in itself a result of democratic governance: the people decide who the people is. In relation to parameters such as age, sanity, sex, education and wealth modern theories of democracy have been relatively explicit about the political character of the question of exclusion/inclusion (Stuart Mill, 1946; Mill, 1967; Macpherson, 1977; Held, 1989; Pateman, 1989). However, when it comes to recognizing the fact that also the territorial demarcation of “the people” is no more than a social construction defined through political processes the awareness seems to be seriously lacking. The reason for this “blind eye” is obvious. It is a result of the hegemonic position of the nation state as overarching principle of societal unification. But although this situation is understandable it is certainly not acceptable. For the consequences of this hegemony of a territorial demarcation of the people has resulted in a categorization of functionally based lines of demarcation as illegitimate. They are said to produce a partial democracy when in fact all democracies are partial in the sense that they exclude someone. To create a “we” there has to be a “them”. That is, those who do not belong to “the people” (Ifersen, 1989: 33; Mouffe, 1993: 141). However, the current weakening of the nation state due to processes of decentralization, internationalization and privatiza-

tion in western Europe makes way for reconsideration. It establishes a situation in which it becomes clearer than ever before that all forms of institutionalizing democratic empowerment has its weak and strong sides. When recognizing this fact we can engage ourselves more presuppositionless in considerations regarding the problems and values of territorially and functionally based forms of democratic empowerment.

The territorially based forms of democratic empowerment has its clear strengths. They serve to promote horizontal coordination e.g. the balancing of influence between policy areas and the level of community integration, which force everyone within a defined territory to reflect on the governance of that geographical area as such. Within this context the principle so central to liberal democratic thought – that channels of influence should be distributed equally between everybody – is ensured though “one (wo-)man one vote”. While this form of empowerment serves to ensure an equal distribution of influence and to enhance a holistic perspective on territorial governance it has two problematic sides. First, it institutionalizes a low level of participation for ordinary citizens due to the central role of elections and representation as means of democratic empowerment. Second, it tends to turn the political into something very abstract. Something remote and distant that has to do with principles, ideologies etc., with little immediate relevance for the everyday life and problems of the individual member of society. A sign of this state of affairs is that most people do not regard as being political the many activities which take place outside the formal institutions of liberal democracy directed towards concrete problem solving which they and others are involved in.

There are two reasons for this abstraction of the political. One is that societies have grown to a size which makes it inevitable that the constitution of territorial communities and activities directed towards collective problem solving have become loosely coupled. This state of affairs is to some extent remedied through the first wave of decentralization from state to municipalities. But in most cases even these decentralized communities are too big to establish close links of communication between policy makers and those involved in concrete processes of public problem solving. The other reason for the abstraction of politics is that the modern notion of citizenship has contributed to making political action highly abstract. In modernity the individual is first defined as a political actor when s/he takes on the role of the citizen, according to which the individual regards it as her/his duty to relate to the governing of society as such. And that is very difficult, not to say impossible, to do so in a concrete manner. For that reason it becomes both necessary and easy for the individual to keep politics at some distance. Necessary because it is downright impossible to remain within the abstract role of the citizen for very long and easy because the political is institutionalized in a way which promotes the notion of the political as a play in which politicians are the actors and citizens the spectators. All citizens have to do to fulfil their political obligations, shout an occasional cheer or a boo and to place the cross every fourth year.

This does not mean that we do not act politically the rest of the time. It means that we don't perceive our concrete problem solving activities as political. In

short we have developed a very narrow perception of the political which defines large parts of human action out of the political realm. This has two serious consequences: First, it smooths the way for a concentration of political power in few hands. For if you choose to step into the political realm you step into a different reality which tends to take all or nothing at all. There is no in between. Either you stay out or you become homo politicus – politician by profession – be it in a grassroots movement or in the established political system. Seen in this light it is understandable that many people conclude that: “politics is not really me”. Politics becomes for the few. Second, the limited role which citizens play in the political theatre results in a limited feeling of responsibility among the citizens for public problem solving. It is legitimate for them to place the responsibility for unsolved matters on the shoulders of the formally powerful politicians. Both of these consequences have serious implications for the ability of liberal democracies to govern efficiently.

This is precisely where functionally based forms of democratic empowerment, e.g. user influence, come in as an important form of empowerment. It is a means to bring the concrete back into the political. For the enrolment in processes of policy-making of those immediately affected by political decision-making and those involved in concrete problem solving moves the centre of the political to where the political as phenomenon is born. That is, the moment in which a mutual recognition of the need to act together in order to solve a defined task is established and disagreement exists as to how it ought to be done. More precisely, the strength of a functional organization of democratic policy-making is its promotion of vertical coordination between those engaged in decision-making and those engaged in concrete problem solving.

However, the question is, whether the price of this concretization of the political is an unequal distribution of channels of empowerment. It has been argued that functionally based channels of empowerment are a threat to democracy because they distribute channels of empowerment unequally among citizens. While those who are part of a functional unit of governance have access to two or more channels of empowerment those who are not must content themselves with territorially defined channels of empowerment. In my opinion this state of affairs is not necessarily a threat to democracy. The principle of political equality does not necessarily mean that all citizens must have equal access to influence on everything. But it calls for a translation of the principle of equality into a functional setting. If functionally based forms of empowerment are to become a means of democratic empowerment it must be ensured that all members of functional units and all functional units within a defined territory have access to the same channels of empowerment.

However, just as territorially based forms of democratic empowerment have serious weaknesses so do the functional. They tend to produce institutional chauvinism and a sectorial perspective on politics. For this reason it is crucial that they are institutionalized in a way which establishes tight bonds between functional and territorial units of societal governance i.e. between user boards and municipal councils. Adding up the advantages and disadvantages of territorial and functional founded channels of empowerment it is evident that nei-

ther of them represents *the* means by which democracy should be institutionalized. What is needed is a patchwork of channels of empowerment which in combination establishes a balance between territorial and functional forms of societal unification.

### **Balancing forms of empowerment in primary school governance**

In the primary school system in Denmark the balance between territorial and functional forms of empowerment has been institutionalized in the shape of a two level system of governance. At the institutional level the functional forms of empowerment reign, whereas territorial forms of empowerment govern on the municipal level. The problem in this form of balancing is its lack of institutionalized bonds between the two forms of empowerment. Such a bond is needed for two reasons: to prevent institutional chauvinism; and to improve dialogue between those involved in concrete governing and decision-makers at different levels in the governing of a policy area. What is badly needed is an intermediate body constituted of municipal politicians and representatives from the user boards at each school. Without it there is a good chance that the two level model of governance will break into two autonomous parts.

While this problem is easy to remedy through institutional reform a more serious challenge confronts the future of user empowerment in the primary school system. The core problem is the balancing of influence among the actors within the individual school. Hence, the introduction of user influence challenges tradition in two ways: it challenges the tradition of a strong work place democracy among the teachers at the individual school; and it challenges the professional authority of the teachers (Sehested and Sørensen, 1997). Hence, the problem of introducing user influence as a form of democratic empowerment is not only a question of balancing the user role against the citizen role. It is also a question of establishing a new relationship between users and professionals. And that will take some time.

### **Notes**

1. A thorough presentation of the history and present state of primary school governance in Denmark, see Sørensen (1995), 'Democracy and regulation in institutions of public governance' Licentiatserien, Institute of Political Science, University of Copenhagen.

2. Denmark has had a "state church" ever since the reformation in 1536, when the church was placed under the jurisdiction of the king. This has produced a highly centralized church structure with little room for substantial competition between different

churches. Accordingly, differences in viewpoint on pedagogical issues, as with religious differences, were mostly settled within the hierarchical system of the state church.

3. Hirschmans concepts exit and voice are developed for a slightly different purpose. His aim is to develop a theory of how individual behaviour ought to be institutionalized in order to increase outcome efficiency (Hirschman, 1970: ch. 1). In the present context the aim is not institutional outcome efficiency but the enhancement of individual empowerment. Hence, exit and voice rep-

resent radically different means of empowerment for individuals in relation to institutions. This transplantation of the concepts from one perspective to another is justified in Sørensen, 'Democracy and empowerment', (1997) *Public Administration*, Vol 75, no. 3.

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