



ACADEMIA ENGELBERG

Friday, 16th of October 2010

Academia Engelberg Foundation

Successful Completion of the 9th Dialogue on Science

Democracy at the crossroads?

Who are the stakeholders who determine democratic decisions? Is it the politicians, the media or the people who decide? What general conditions are necessary for direct democracy to be experienced?

"The citizens' participation in decision-making processes on state level faces new challenges, especially in times of globalization and growing media possibilities of IT", Klaus Hug, president of the Academia Engelberg Foundation, mentioned during the opening ceremony of the ninth Dialogue on Science held in Engelberg. During three days, these challenges were analysed by numerous experts from all around the world together with roughly 120 personalities from science, industry, politics and society.

Globalization puts democracy to the test

Nowadays, the areas of influence of economy and politics do not always coincide. Economic integration has gone much further than political integration. That is why problems often arise. "Democracy, as we know it today, is national and is closely tied to nation states. Increasing globalization challenges basic requirements of democracy where decision-makers are approved by those who are affected by the decisions. However, this often does not apply in a globalized and increasingly interdependent world. Decisions which are relevant to us are increasingly taken by committees and people who were not elected by us nor depend on the representatives we elected", Professor Hanspeter Kriesi, University of Zurich, pointed out in his introductory presentation. As an example, he referred to the dispute regarding Zurich Airport: The population of Southern Germany achieved a change in the landing approach after a decision taken in Germany. Using the example of the European Union, he showed that democratization of European policies is incomplete on a supranational level. As a consequence of weak political structures, the revival of nationalism is more common and populist tendencies can be noticed.

Power of media is overestimated

"There is no doubt that media plays an important role in politics. Many politicians feel obligated to adapt themselves to the media. From a pessimist point of view, the growing influence of media leads to spectacularization, personalization and trivialization of politics. The increasing diversification of media channels bears the risk that people



only gather information which confirms and strengthens their own view of the world leading to a polarization of politics and all unpleasant consequences related to it. From an optimistic point of view, however, the diversity of media channels fosters dialogue between the citizens themselves and political decision-makers. Despite their lack of political substance, free daily newspapers – which are often criticized – might raise the interest of the youth", according to Kriesi who is convinced that the importance of media is highly overestimated: "In the end, politicians – and not the journalists – are still the leading communicators."

Enhanced communication!

Arthur Lupia from the University of Michigan disagreed with the assumption according to which citizens do not know enough about politics in these days. It is assumed that citizens who cannot give correct answers to political questions make the wrong decisions. But for Lupia, this is the erroneous approach: "People can only make the right decisions if they have all the necessary information." It often occurs that incomplete information is delivered by experts and this is wrong. People denouncing this type of "ignorance" are recommended to focus more on the citizens and less on themselves. For Lupia the biggest problem is that many experts are convinced that they are right. Only if the so-called do-gooders know the real needs of the voters, information can really reach them. Then, the voters decide themselves what is relevant to them and act accordingly. When spreading information, local references have to be established. Lupia continued and said: "Voters have to be interested in the issue in order to deal with the proposal and they need to be aware of the benefits for themselves and their environment. If experts are credible and accepted by the voters, their information will be acknowledged."

Does democracy has a future?

Professor Wolfgang Merkel from the Humboldt University of Berlin does not see the democratic form of government at risk. However, he raised concerns that "the arrogance of political leaders meets with resistance among citizens or they mobilize themselves – a good example is the new construction of the train station in Stuttgart". Professor Stefanie Bailer from ETH Zurich criticized professionalism of the militia system as it is known in Switzerland: "The more complex the issues, the more successful lobbyists will be!" At the end of the conference, former Federal Counsellor Arnold Koller spoke about federalism and democracy and warned that federalism can neither establish nor guarantee democracy. According to him, federalism is a successful and democratic way to solve conflicts in multicultural states. But it is not a panacea, as it is thought to be today, especially in conflict areas.

**Outlook for 2011**

The tenth Dialogue on Science of the Academia Engelberg Foundation will be held in September 2011 and will deal with "Personalized Medicine". Soon, mankind will be able to link not only its personal genetic code but also its personal health data with medical research. Such developments will enhance personal diagnosis and therapy. Patients will then have the option to administrate their health data themselves and to play an active role in medical research.

Bridge between science and society

Fundamental scientific findings are likely to meet strong reservations and encounter mistrust among the general public. The Academia Engelberg Foundation (www.academia-engelberg.ch) contributes its share to the creation of a new foundation of trust through interdisciplinary dialogue between the scientific community and the general public. Every autumn, personalities from science, industry, culture, politics and society meet in Engelberg, Switzerland. In addition to this, projects are carried out and follow-up events are organized as results of the conference.

* * *

Media Relations

Photos, texts and videos on the conference are continuously available at http://www.academia-engelberg.ch/conference_2010.php5

More information: Beatrice Suter, KommunikationsWerkstatt,
on the phone +41 41 660 96 19 or by email media@academia-engelberg.ch