

# **Democratic Fatigue: information overload**

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Is increasing choice and information always what we want? Do these necessarily facilitate democratic sense and empowerment? The non-participation in recent Police Commissioner elections suggests otherwise. Parallels in recent healthcare initiatives are instructive.



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So, after all the official encouragement to participate, few people seemed interested in electing a Police Commissioner. Only a small fraction bothered to vote. Soon after, the media parade for us politicians, academics and pundits – all express perplexity or concern. One recurring salvaging explanation is this: citizens do not have enough *information* to make a choice.

As one of these unengaged citizens, I do not share these puzzlements, concerns or notions. My mind and life are already overwhelmed by choices and information, and I cannot cope with being told that more are always good for me.

There is a great difference between wanting to have an individual voice with access to dialogue, and submitting to governmentally-initiated and designed choice of other people's packages. I may want the many authorities in my life to listen to me, but I do not want, necessarily, the very complex and detailed responsibility of having to vet or choose who all those authorities might be.

Evolved democracy is very different from democracy by government prescription. This is a hard-learned lesson from several of our righteously justified interventions in the Middle East in recent decades.

There are interesting parallels here to our current, governmentally mandated, healthcare commissioning. As a senior GP I know most of my peers have little enthusiasm for their freshly bestowed, mostly involuntary, mantle of authority: *Clinical Commissioning Groups*. Yes, we certainly want managers to listen, but we do

not want to have to do their job. Putatively democratised devices to commission welfare services appeal to certain kinds of impatient politicians, academics and tank-thinkers. But those with long experience on the frontline usually have much less confidence or enthusiasm for these populist initiatives: the promise of more democratic and speedy accountability rings hollow.

The nature and delivery of our welfare services is inevitably highly complex and protean. Such demotic systems of presentation and packaging, however well-intentioned, attempt to short-circuit this complexity. They will serve us poorly because, sadly, they are but specious abbreviations of more authentically evolved democracies.

Government prescribed democracy becomes, almost inescapably, a doomed oxymoron.

Neat solutions to such conundrums? There are none. We can offer only our wisest compromises.

In the past, I think we accepted more such ambiguity, so understood this better.

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