

## MEMORANDUM

The goal of the Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation is to advance good government and to strengthen democratic institutions worldwide by fostering creative and effective government problem solving. In trying to determine the research foci and priorities for the Ash Institute, we are confronted with a dual challenge. We are all agreed that the research of the Institute should focus on the cutting edges of the intersection between innovation and democratic governance. But in determining the actual choice, the focus and the priorities of research themes we also have to be mindful of the research interests of the faculty. In other words our choice of research themes while they have to be sufficiently faithful to the mission of the Institute, they must at the same time resonate sufficiently with the interest of some of the faculty so they can be engaged in the work of the Institute. While the Institute will be uncomfortable funding research that is not central to its concerns, it is also highly unlikely that a faculty member will agree to undertake research that is not central to her or his intellectual interests.

However matching the priorities of the Institute and the interests of the faculty will not happen immediately; and one way for us to move forward is to gradually grope our way and work out a more focused research agenda over the next few years. My own suggestion at this stage is to aim to identify a few tentative and broad *streams of research* (rather than more narrowly defined questions or themes). Based on my reading of the faculty responses, and my own sense of the Institute's foci and priorities, I list below a few preliminary suggestions:

### **1. Innovations in Democratic Governance in Plural, Divided or Multicultural Societies.**

Democratic institutions were initially conceived and designed for relatively homogeneous communities—first city-states and then nation-states. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries representative democracy co-evolved with nationally-organized states. But that homogeneity (always more theoretical and enforced and less spontaneous and genuine than it seemed) is ever less characteristic of modern states.

Among the economically advanced states of the “north,” the most certain prediction that can be made about any society is that it will be less ethnically homogeneous than it is today. High immigration rates (mostly from south to north) are likely to persist, often for good economic

reasons. Quite apart from immigration, differential fertility rates will mean that countries as different as the US, Finland, Italy, Japan, the UK and New Zealand will become ever more diverse in ethnic, cultural, and religious terms.

Meanwhile, in much of the “south,” the post-colonial state, with its many national, ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural groups does not fit the mould of the nation-states as they first emerged in northwestern Europe. Many of them are multinational states and the consensus on what is ‘national’ is yet to develop fully. Governments can not always formulate national laws or policies as they are likely to have differential impact on the diverse sections of the society. Not surprisingly each group seeks to preserve its own special interests and often makes demands on the government that may be at variance or even in conflict with the demands of another group.

Multicultural states are, in short, our future. For many reasons, we welcome that fact. Nonetheless, it poses challenges to traditional conceptions of community and democracy. One central challenge for innovative democratic governance is to identify and understand practices and institutions that can capitalize on the advantages of diversity, while managing the inevitable tensions.

The democratic practice of the ‘rule by majority’, for example, often leads to the winner taking all and domination by the majority groups. Minority groups and communities, especially the women and economically least well-off (also often the historically most disadvantaged groups) are often rendered close to voiceless and consigned to neglect. There are very few homogeneous nations in the world today. Yet current democratic constitutions, governments, institutions and processes have not been designed or adapted to respond effectively to the challenges of plural, diverse and divided societies. And in the absence of effective democratic instruments and institutions the tyranny of the majority often remains unbridled.

*The challenge for the Institute is to find new and creative ways to respond to the needs of diverse and plural communities. One size no longer fits all. Constitutions, institutional arrangements and political processes have to be reordered and adapted so that the interests and perceptions of all parts of the community have a legitimate and just place in governance.*

## **2. Democratic Governments as Guarantor of Social Justice:**

We believe that government is central to our society. Our belief in democracy is premised on the fact that democratic government is usually the best guarantor of social justice and an orderly society. We believe that because democratic governments reflect the popular societal will - they are supposedly participatory, transparent and accountable; they respect plural and diverse perspectives, promote gender and social equity, and allow freedom of choice, expression and belief – and therefore they are best suited to advance those goals and ideals. However, our view that a democratic government that reflects popular will is better equipped to ensure social justice,

to create an even playing field that allows its citizens the freedom to realize their full potentials and creativity; and to deliver the services and opportunities that people need is increasingly being questioned in the face of empirical evidence both in developed and developing societies. Indeed many question the very efficacy of democratic government as guarantors of social justice.

The reality, however, is that all governments work within a broadly based consensus which is negotiated through complex bargaining amongst numerous stakeholders and powerful interest groups who have strong vested interests in preserving the *status quo*. The ability of the government to persuade the groups that stand to benefit from the status quo to voluntarily give up their privileged position in the name of fair play or social justice is very limited. The entrenched groups are able to resist any attempts by the government that threatens to alter the existing power structure. On the other hand the poor are largely unorganized and cannot be mobilized easily despite their large numbers. The governments faced with the conflicting demands of the articulate sections and the voiceless poor often seek safety by siding with the powerful. Benefits of progress have not accrued uniformly to all people. One consequence of which has been widening inequalities within the countries and a congruence of human deprivations amongst the most disadvantaged groups.

No government can claim legitimacy that does not put social justice at the heart of its agenda. *The challenge for us therefore is to find ways in which democratic governments can regain popular legitimacy by creating an even playing field so that a socially just and equitable society is created.*

### **3. Accountability in Democratic Governments:**

While the case for democracy is obvious, the gap between the aspirations and the realities is often large. Whether it is an advanced democracy like the United States or Britain, or transitional societies like Russia or Poland or newly emerging democracy like the Philippines or South Africa, there is widespread mal-governance and a popular perception of betrayal. The disillusionment with governments comes from numerous sources. Some of these relate to the very fundamentals of democratic governments itself. In the abridged version, democracy is

reduced to the right of electoral participation periodically; and for the rest of the time the citizens have come to be seen as bystanders in the game of politics. There is a huge divide between the rulers and the ruled with no signs of that divide being bridged. The two – the rulers and the ruled - may live in the same country but often traverse in different universe. Between elections the citizens are expected to hibernate. The elected leaders cease to be accountable to the voters. In many countries the only recourse for the people is to vote out the incumbent government – which they often do – but sadly the remedy is often meaningless since the alternatives are scarcely any better. While this is may be particularly true of developing countries, the developed countries are not immune to it either. The influence of campaign finance, special interest groups and the dominance of big business ensures to constrain the freedom of action of the elected representatives. Lack of accountability lies at the core of malgovernance, corruption, violation of human rights and citizen discontent. Popular election is a necessary requisite but not a sufficient condition for effective democracy.

***The challenge for the Institute is to discover ways by which governments can be made more accountable and citizen-centric.***