



November 2021

Fostering Legitimacy Bottom-Up

Contribution to GTI Forum [An Earth Constitution: Has the Time Come?](#)

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While the goal at the core of Glen Martin's [Earth Constitution](#) is a laudable one, and elements of his proposal are no doubt valuable, I write briefly to endorse and share the concerns of several commenters that the approach proposed is deeply problematic.

Hannah Arendt, in her extraordinary essay "Reflections on Violence," writes that "Power springs up whenever people get together and act in concert, but it derives its legitimacy from the initial getting together rather than from any action that may follow."¹

This goes to the core of the idea of the Earth Constitution as proposed, both in terms of its top-down approach and in its continuing embrace of sovereign nation-states as one of the constituent elements of a global democracy.

If a system of global democratic governance is to have legitimacy, it must derive that legitimacy from a process of the people coming together to act in concert. A constitution developed by a small, select group of people and introduced through the auspices of nation-states, most of which do not themselves have such legitimacy, cannot be a legitimate form of power. If this is the path taken towards the introduction of an Earth Constitution, the expected outcome must be an illegitimate global system of power, and one incapable of (and likely uninterested in) enabling the Great Transition we seek.

While I appreciate and sympathize with the expressed desire for speed in the introduction of an Earth democracy, the suggestion that doing so through the existing Westphalian system of nation-states and the United Nations would be swifter than the alternative of cultivating something new from the grassroots up strikes me as naive at best. A brief glance at how long it

is taking to negotiate global climate action through the existing geopolitical arrangement, let alone a look at splintering global trade regimes, failed disarmament processes, and a largely toothless set of international courts, suggests that this is already a dead end in terms of working towards global democracy.

The constitution of an Earth democracy can only be developed through the process of constituting such a democracy, from the grassroots up, while using such democratic structures as already exist to support and enable communities to do this work. It is my view that a global confederation of local democracies is a vital long-term goal, but it must remain bottom-up, and can only be achieved by local democracies acting in concert and encouraging others to join them.

Regarding the proposed structure of a global parliamentary system, I suggest that neither the experts' House of Counselors nor the single member vast electorates of the House of Peoples, nor of course the House of Nations, meet the needs of a Great Transition. This system would entrench the deeply problematic adversarialism and hierarchicalism which are central to the root causes of the crises we face. It is only by cultivating systems of interdependence and horizontalism that we can truly address these crises.

Endnotes

1. Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Violence," *Journal of International Affairs* 23, no. 1 (1969): 19.

About the Author



Tim Hollo is executive director of the Green Institute, where he focuses on ecological philosophy, practice, and policy related to the rights of nature, universal basic income, and participatory democracy. He is Visiting Fellow at the Australian National University's School of Regulation and Global Governance. He previously served as Communications Director for Australian Greens Leader Christine Milne and has been both a board member and campaigner at Greenpeace Australia Pacific. As both an environmentalist and musician, Tim founded Green Music Australia that works to reduce the environmental impact of the music scene and use its growing leadership to drive deep social and cultural change.

About the Publication

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