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By Steve Baron

The New Zealand Centre for Political Debate

## People Power

New Zealanders have exercised their democratic right to vote and decide the political future of our very unique and wonderful country. But is that where it should end for another three years and does our vote really count for anything, does it really have any effect the day after the election? Politicians are supposed to represent the wishes of the people who elect them but it seems clear that all too frequently, this simply does not happen and voters would be right to wonder if this really is a democracy or just one day of democracy and three years of an elected dictatorship?

All the way through the election campaign we saw election bribes, grand promises and politicians pandering to every minority out there because they sought absolute power and the right to govern for the next three years. But should politicians be allowed this right, this oligarchy, or should the People be allowed to make more decisions than just once every three years at a general election? That might be a foreign concept to many New Zealanders but it operates extremely well in Switzerland, several European countries and many US States. It is called Binding Citizens Initiated Referenda or BCIR for short. It is not a replacement for Representative Democracy, it is simply an adjunct to it, the next step forward from MMP toward real democracy.

Our representatives are supposed to represent voters so why is there so much dissension amongst New Zealanders and why has so much controversial legislation been allowed to

pass in recent years that doesn't seem to have the support of the majority of New Zealanders? The main problem would appear to be conscience votes recently exercised in Parliament over issues such as prostitution, abortion, euthanasia, lowering the drinking age, civil unions etc so perhaps conscience votes in Parliament could and should be abolished and put to Binding Referendums? But that wouldn't cover issues like the removal of appeals to the Privy Council, GE, immigration, nutritional supplement law changes or even sending troops to Vietnam all those years ago.

I believe our time honoured system of Representative Democracy needs to be addressed. We desperately need a complimentary system so we don't have to accept the best bribe that comes along at election time like. A system where voters can

from time to time make decisions on issues that concern them when they feel Parliament is not responsive to their wishes and for issues that cannot wait until an election three years away.

The weakness of our current political system is that once a government is elected there are few checks and balances between elections. Voters must accept whatever the government or coalition of the day wants. This it often does without a popular mandate or majority support of New Zealanders and much of which is introduced by a List MP who is not responsible to an electorate and who cannot simply be thrown out at the next election as some would have us think.

As an analogy, remember when

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monopolies and duopolies dominated the market in most things during the 70's and 80's? You could only use NZ Post's phone lines if you also agreed to only use a basic model handset supplied by them and even then you could only rent it and not own it etc. Nowadays consumers have options and may buy one product at a time from several different telecommunications suppliers. Many politicians are perhaps old fashioned monopolists, in that they are still trying to force consumers to accept policies they don't want by bundling them with policies they do want. However, when we elect a government that doesn't mean we agree with everything they want to do.

Over 130 years ago the Swiss introduced the concept of BCIR which gave the people of Switzerland the chance to vote on the merits of a few important issues that they felt the government had not addressed adequately, so that for once there was an equal partnership of power. It would appear the ultimate win-win situation for both government and the voters. And like it is in Switzerland now, the New Zealand voters would be content to let the politicians do most of the routine work of politics, and would be willing to listen to their

advice on complicated issues and for their part the politicians would learn that ordinary people can make wise decisions. There are those who would argue against BCIR, but as David Lange recently said in our book 'People Power', "These arguments have been largely discredited by the experience overseas."

It would seem logical, in a modern well informed society that New Zealanders would want, and have a democratic right to, make decisions on issues that directly affect them through the system of Binding Referendums. People are no longer prepared to accept that those in positions of authority always know what is best for them. It is time for change but firstly, New Zealanders must demand it of their politicians.

Steve Baron is co-editor of the book 'People Power: How to make the government listen to you for a change'. He is also the Founder of [www.BetterDemocracy.co.nz](http://www.BetterDemocracy.co.nz), a businessman and stood for Parliament as an Independent candidate for Pakuranga at the last election. Steve can be contacted by email at [steve@BetterDemocracy.co.nz](mailto:steve@BetterDemocracy.co.nz).

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Thanks so much for your interest and taking the time to read this message. To find out more about how you can support us visit [www.nzcpd.com](http://www.nzcpd.com).

Regards

Muriel Newman  
(founder & director of NZCPD)

