

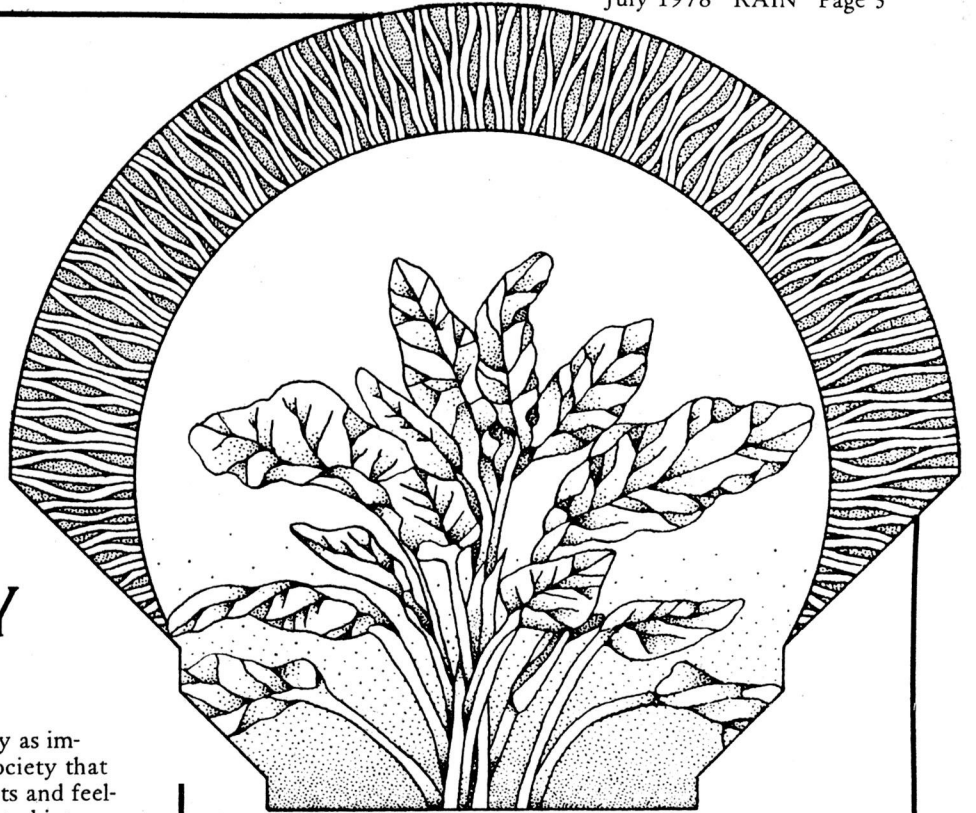
## CONSENSUS DEMOCRACY

The ways by which we take actions are frequently as important as the actions themselves. If we want a society that lives rather than talks equality, where the thoughts and feelings of every person are listened to and incorporated into decisions and actions, and which can attain and maintain a harmonious and deep-rooted relation with the rest of Nature, we need to change our ways of making public decisions. Majority-rule democracy will not work.

Majority-rule processes have been widely used in a period when we have given tacit consent to rapid change—specifically because they allow us to ignore and override the desires of significant numbers of people who would never consent to the changes proposed or the way they are done. The self-serving interests of a minority, coupled with the vote of people not understanding the implications of the action being taken or hoping it might benefit them, has repeatedly overridden the real interests of the majority by this process.

Urban growth serves as a well documented example. The high costs of growth to the community as a whole have been repeatedly shown. The percent who profit are small, and their identity predictable. Yet the local businesspeople give support in hope of expanding their own operations—not realizing that growth brings in more and larger competitors and they are as likely to lose as to gain from the process. "Everyone" appears to have opportunity to profit in real estate exchanges, yet the homeowners forget they must purchase another home in the same inflated market, and the real profits always seem to go to the same people with inside information, contacts, credit and knowledge of the game.

Majority-rule voting results too frequently in energy being put into obtaining a majority rather than in listening to and coming to terms with the real and important feelings of the minority. It creates a divisiveness in carrying out decisions between those victoriously carrying out their wishes and the losers grudgingly accepting the imposition of the decisions upon their lives. Majority-rule tends towards what is popular or easy rather than what is right, and gives little power to the always necessary voices of dissension. It gives an illusion of strength and permanence to decisions that belies the always shifting feelings of a community. It responds to the interests of power, not people.



We tend to consider majority rule as the only workable form of democratic decisionmaking. Yet one alternative in particular, *consensus*, is far more democratic and far more respectful of the community as a whole and responsive to it. In consensus, decisions must be acceptable to everyone. To us, used to approving actions which *aren't* acceptable to everyone, that sounds impossible. It isn't. Native American, Chinese, Quaker, and many parts of Japanese society have long operated well by consensus. Seeing it operate in, of all things, a strongly polarized U.S. government planning committee, it is amazingly effective in getting people's feelings clearly articulated, involving everyone in an effort to find a workable solution, and in leaving everyone with a sense of commitment to make the decisions work.

At first impression, consensus is unwieldy and slow compared to simple voting. But it results in real differences being worked out rather than being swept under the table and results in pulling the energies of the whole group together behind a decision rather than the obstruction, indifference and uncommitted assistance more common with voted decisions. It requires a group or community to deal with its real problems on a more honest, open and direct level, which in itself is a major improvement over how we do things now. Consensus also differs from majority rule in that it is basically stabilizing. Failure to agree upon a new action doesn't mean inaction—it means merely that things go on as they have unless or until full agreement on change is reached.

In reality, majority rule represents a false economy. The minutes saved in reaching a "decision" are more than lost in implementation, in the anger, frustration and rejection felt by losing voters, and in the repeated cropping up of the unresolved differences at every possible opportunity. A real community needs the solidarity of shared respect for each other and of shared and accepted direction which can only emerge from consensus kinds of processes.

—Tom Bender