

Doing democracy better: is Scotland the threat of a good example?

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The ideal of democracy is almost universally valued but the experience of it usually falls well short of the ideal. One of the outcomes of this has been the surge of 'populism' across the US and Europe, which poses a threat to liberal democracies, particularly in the context of neoliberal globalization, increasing levels of inequality of wealth and power and the seeming incapacity of ordinary people to shape the decisions that affect their lives. We need to do democracy better. At the same time, adult education has been transformed into 'human resource' training through a discourse of lifelong learning which primarily values economic activity. The contribution of adult education to renewing democracy – historically the lodestone of a certain type of adult education – has withered or disappeared altogether. However, there are signs of alternatives that we need to remind ourselves of and should seek to foster if possible. The Scottish referendum on independence from the UK, according to the UK Electoral Commission, was a model of social and political engagement. How did this happen and what role did adult education play in this experience? What are the consequences for adult education today in renewing democracy? These and other questions will form the basis of this presentation.