

CONNECTIONS

An Annual Journal of the Kettering Foundation | 2019

Governing *With* the People

By David Mathews p. 2

**Felt Democracy: Multinational
Research Exchange Week, 2019**

By Wendy Willis p. 48

**When Communities Embrace
Shared Responsibility**

By Richard C. Harwood p. 68



Exploring the
Relationship between
**THE PUBLIC
AND GOVERNMENT**

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at www.kettering.org.

Connections is published by the Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459. The articles in *Connections* reflect the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its directors, or its officers.

© Copyright 2019 by the Kettering Foundation
ISSN 2470-8003

Executive Editor
Melinda Gilmore

Editors
Valerie Lemmie
Phillip D. Lurie

Copy Editors
Laura Carlson
Ellen Dawson-Witt

Design and Production
Long's Graphic Design, Inc.

Illustrations
Long's Graphic Design, Inc.



CONTENTS

- 2 **Governing *With* the People**
David Mathews
- 16 **City Managers: Creating a Collaborative Culture of Engagement**
Ron Carlee
- 22 **Democratic Practices That Inspire Collective Action: Engaging the Full Community through Citizen-Centric Strategies**
Cheryl Hilvert, Michael Huggins, and Doug Linkhart
- 28 **Imagining the Deliberative City Manager: The Case for Local Systems Leadership**
Martín Carcasson
- 35 **A Public Voice: A Look at National and Local Efforts**
Tony Wharton
- 41 **Connecting to Congress**
Michael Neblo
- 48 **Felt Democracy: Multinational Research Exchange Week, 2019**
Wendy Willis
- 55 **Costa Rica's Ottón Solís: A Politician Who Puts Citizens First**
Maura Casey
- 61 **Decades of Dialogue: Reflecting on US-China Exchanges**
Maxine S. Thomas
- 68 **When Communities Embrace Shared Responsibility**
Richard C. Harwood

Costa Rica's Ottón Solís: A Politician Who Puts Citizens First

By Maura Casey



Ottón Solís can be described in many ways: He is one of nine children and the son of a cattle rancher. He is an economist and political thinker who grew up never intending to enter politics. He is an idealist, despite losing the 2006 presidential race in Costa Rica by only a few votes. Most of all, he is a man who believes in the power of ordinary people to make change.

Solís participated in the first two days of the Kettering Foundation's Multinational Research Exchange Week in April, which focused on the relationship between government institutions and communities in approaching public challenges. He

shared perspectives from Costa Rica, where he represents his country as a director of the Central American Bank for Economic Integration.

During meetings and meals, Solís spoke at length about his vision of democracy, the role of citizens, and the role that the Kettering Foundation ideas have played in his thinking.

He introduced himself and his thinking during the plenary session of the first day, when he addressed those attending the multicultural workshop week. Here is an edited version of those remarks:

"I'm privileged to be here. Let me start with a conceptual view of

democracy. Democracy is a system of responsibility, and in it, people don't surrender power to those elected. They're the owners of power. In monarchies, the owners of power are kings, queens, and sheiks. In dictatorships, the generals are owners of power. In a communist regime, the means of production is ostensibly owned by everyone, but power is owned by a few.

"In democracy, the people are the only owners of power, and when you are the owner of something, you exercise responsibility over it. If you are an owner of a farm, your relationship to the farm is very different from if you are a worker on the farm. So, people in a democracy need to

behave as owners of power. . . . In fact, the least powerful person in a democracy is the elected official. Everyone else is freer to change opinion than the elected official because the elected official is enslaved to whatever he or she promised during the campaign.

"What we did in Costa Rica was to tell the people, look, power belongs to you, so act as such. Do not act thinking I have more responsibility than you. If I'm elected president of Costa Rica, you will continue to be the owners of power. So do not work because we pay you money to go to meetings; work because you are the owners of the thing. Do not work because we promise you a post or a government position. Work for the correct use of power.

"When the citizens work only for self-interest and feel that the leaders have the responsibility, the leaders feel some entitlement. And that's where corruption develops because the system allows them to feel special. Instead, when the system has politicians as employees of the people, then you end up with a more ethical system."

A CHANGE OF PLANS

Ethics are at the core of Solís' political philosophy. He explained how he began to develop his philosophy while studying overseas.



“I was 21 when I graduated from college with my first degree in economics. I went to Manchester, England, to work on my graduate degree.” He smiled, remembering. “I saw that country, with its awful climate, having achieved all that it has, and I became envious—and eager to change Costa Rica,” Solís said.

“My life plan was never to enter politics. My life plan was to divide my time between being a cattle farmer, like my father, and an academic. But in England I decided I had to do something.”

That “something” occurred after Solís moved back to Costa Rica, which, similar to the US, has three branches of government—an executive branch, the judiciary, and a unicameral legislative assembly. After serving as a cabinet minister and resigning after two and a half years over differences regarding the low standards of government ethics, he ran for the legislative assembly and won.

But when Solís took office, he encountered his first challenge—rules that allowed members of the governing party in the assembly to spend a percentage of the budget on public works in whatever way they saw fit. To Solís, this was unacceptable. Yet if he refused entirely, he would deprive his district of needed improvements.



In democracy, the people are the only owners of power, and when you are the owner of something, you exercise responsibility over it.

PUTTING THE PEOPLE FIRST

His solution was to go directly to the people and ask them what they wanted to spend the money on. But they needed some education first.

“People tend to think, ‘Why don’t you finance this road?’ But they don’t understand about budget constraints,” Solís said.

Solís created a foundation, the acronym for which works in both English and Spanish: LEAD, for Local Empowerment for Administration of Development. The foundation would help educate people about the budget across the 11 counties in his district so the voters could meet and make informed choices. And it helped citizens learn about the entire budget process—not just the portion devoted to public works.

“At the time, we had a budget deficit,” Solís said. “I spoke to them

about why we needed a tax bill. They attended meetings and were educated politically.

“The people learned that power belonged to them,” Solís said. “And the scheme was very successful; the people felt for the first time the owners of the budget because they could choose whether to do this public works project or another one. What the people decided was respected to the last penny,” he said.

Solís said his methods didn’t make him particularly popular with his fellow members of the assembly, who were used to deep, centralized, condescending, and clientelist practices. Some didn’t even speak to him. But he could see how effective it was to empower citizens by involving them in the budget process. And he began to think about forming a new

political party, one that would be for citizens.

KETTERING FOUNDATION'S INFLUENCE

Around this time, Solís began to read Kettering Foundation publications. “I read the magazines the foundation published and *Politics for People* by David Mathews,” Solís said. “It encouraged me to understand that I was not lost. When you are creating new things, you are often in doubt. But when I read it, I felt sure I was on the right path.”

Solís cofounded the Citizens’ Action Party in 2001. In 2002, after just one year, the party gained 26 percent of the vote. Soon after, he decided to run for president—and was determined to use the same truthful, direct approach he had used when he was a member of the national assembly.

“The only way to have true authority within a democracy is to be ethical,” Solís said.

Solís’s view of what is and is not acceptable in politics is shaped by his sense of ethics. He believes a lack of ethics leads to corruption, of which there are at least four types, Solís said.

One is classical corruption—stealing from the state, which he said is rare in Costa Rica.

The second is lying during the campaign, which is unacceptable, he believes. “You cannot lie to the people. You have to tell them the truth.”



Solís cofounded the Citizens’ Action Party in 2001. In 2002, after just one year, the party gained 26 percent of the vote. Soon after, he decided to run for president.

The third is a form of lying—using words that hide your real intent. “This is easy, especially in Spanish,” he said. “Like using a term such as ‘modernization’ to hide the fact that you intend to privatize government services, which is very controversial in Costa Rica.”

The fourth form of corruption is appointing people to government positions not because they are the best people, but because they are members of your party. “This results in the politicizing of decisions. It also contributes to polarization. . . . I believe the announcement of solutions to problems is not polarizing. If politicians explained their answers to problems such as immigration in a very serious way, not a simplistic way, and answered questions, this would fight polarization. But they have too much of a one-track mind, focused on their own campaigns, their own reelection, and they give over-simplified answers, usually focused on the negative. That just makes things worse.”

UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTHS

Putting ethics at the heart of his presidential campaign meant that Solís had to give the voters the unvarnished truth. But it wasn't always comfortable.

“I told people all the nasty things I intended to do. I told voters I would increase the tax burden, which is



very low in Costa Rica. I said I would reduce the size of the state, give agricultural subsidies only to farmers who worked at least eight hours per day and give scholarships only to students who made an effort to get good grades. I told people that the results of many actions would not be seen for a long time,” Solís said.

He advocated for gender equality, talked about human rights, and refused to accept campaign contributions of more than \$10 a month from anyone, not even relatives.

Solís also said he wouldn't pretend to know answers when he did not, which he made clear at town hall gatherings.

He didn't like to make a speech when he attended such meetings. Rather, he said, he wanted to have a dialogue with citizens.

“Very often, people would ask questions I didn't know how to



People are longing for officeholders to tell them the truth. When they do, it adds to the conversation of how to make democracy stronger and what must continue to be done to make democracy work.

answer. I would say, ‘I don’t know.’ My staff kept statistics and told me that 42 percent of my answers to people were either ‘I don’t know’ or ‘I disagree with you,’” Solís said. “Politicians don’t know everything, but they always have an answer. Yet if you want the authority to make changes, there is only one way. That is to tell people the truth.”

The election of 2006 was a cliff-hanger. In the end, Solís lost by less than a percentage point.

Despite that heartbreaking loss, Solís remains an idealist. He doesn’t believe that there is a lack of honest people in politics. Most are honest, he insisted: “What is rare is courage—courage to denounce the corruption of colleagues, to constantly remind the people that

besides rights they also have responsibilities, and courage to prompt citizens’ awareness of their own power.”

Citizens must ask more questions during campaigns, Solís said. Journalists, too, because the media can still, through reporting, help the people to take the true measure of a politician.

So, at the end, Solís addressed a simple question. Is he an optimist?

“Yes, absolutely,” he said immediately.

Why?

“Humanity has sorted out so many tough problems—some of them, just in time. Look at the Soviet tyranny in Eastern Europe, the population explosion, the resolution of the Cuban missile crisis, even global problems like slavery. And for many of these things, people marched and brought about solutions. They have done many wonderful things. So, there is evidence in history that supports being an optimist.

“People are longing for officeholders to tell them the truth. When they do, it adds to the conversation of how to make democracy stronger and what must continue to be done to make democracy work.” ■

Maura Casey is a senior associate of the Kettering Foundation and a former editorial writer for the New York Times. She can be reached at caseynyt@gmail.com.