

CONNECTIONS

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The Work of the Kettering Foundation: Challenges and Changes Ahead

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On the Formation of Citizens

By Elizabeth Gish and Camryn Wilson p. 18

Breaking the Mold: Journalism Reimagined

By Paloma Dallas and Paula Ellis p. 62



INNOVATING FOR DEMOCRACY

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.

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The Battle to Preserve Our Democracy: An Interview with Sharon L. Davies

By Scott London



Sharon L. Davies stepped into the role of president and CEO of the Kettering Foundation in April 2022. Journalist and longtime Kettering collaborator Scott London sat down with her to talk about the threats facing democracy today, some early takeaways from her first months on the job, and where she hopes to lead the foundation in the years ahead.

Scott London: Many worry that we are in a period of democratic decline in America. New restrictions on voting rights, a loss of trust in government, racial and economic inequalities, and intensifying polarization are now posing serious threats to our democracy. What do you see?

Sharon L. Davies: I would describe it as a battle for the preservation of our democracy. We are a deeply fragmented society today and

unfortunately some of the fragmentation is being deliberately and intentionally organized by those who are not committed to democratic principles and values. There are some among us who seem complacent about the enduring nature of our democracy and might even prefer an authoritarian leader or an autocratic system of governance if it means they can control the reins of power.

I think we have good evidence for this in events like those of January 6, 2021. A past sitting president refused to commit himself to the peaceful transition of power, which is one of the fundamental requirements of a democratic system of government.

We also know there are many in our country who fear our increasing diversity today. It is serious because it is a clear sign that instead of embracing our growing diversity as a strength, some are looking in the opposite direction and seeing it as a weakness and wishing for an earlier time in our history when our society was less diverse.

London: In their book *Four Threats: The Recurring Crises of American Democracy*, Suzanne Mettler and Robert Lieberman describe conflicts around diversity—debates about who has a rightful place in our political community—as one of several enduring challenges facing our democracy.

Davies: One of the striking things about that book is the authors' observation that American democracy has gone through crises throughout its history. If we think back to the Civil War, for example, we were as close to falling apart as a democratic nation as we have ever been. A big part of it had to do with the deeply polarized views of our citizenry on the institution of slavery.

During the civil rights era of the 20th century, we were similarly polarized about the treatment of Black citizens. We had a system of legalized discrimination against Black Americans and had to work through very extreme differences of opinion about how to address that. We survived that, too.

One of the oddly comforting things about *Four Threats* is the case it makes that we have come through crises of democracy before. But I say that without meaning to suggest that we should take the dangers today lightly. We can't afford to do that. Democracies can be lost. And so, we must be willing to pay attention to the signs that these threats are present again today.

London: Given all the threats facing American democracy today, where do you see potential leverage points for turning things around?

Davies: I think we have always found strength when citizens have



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come together. Democracy is an inherently fragile idea, and one of the obligations of citizenship is that we must always be prepared as citizens to come to its defense when there are signs that it's in danger.

Although it is under threat, I believe Americans will come together to defend our democracy. I wouldn't call myself an optimist. But I do have an unwavering faith in the ability of our country to prevail in the end and to protect our democracy.

London: John Lewis, the late congressman from Georgia, spoke of democracy as a verb, as something that was best realized *in the doing*.



Reverend Joseph Lowery, President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, his wife Evelyn, and John Lewis (L-R) led several thousand civil rights marchers across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on February 14, 1982. John Lewis was one of the original Selma to Montgomery marchers who was severely beaten on the bridge in 1965.



As he saw it, every generation has to take it upon itself to protect and defend the values of democracy.

Davies: That's right. Over the past several decades, the Kettering Foundation has been helping us understand the ways citizens can come together across chasms of difference to find some common ground and, once they have found that, to contemplate common actions that can be taken. The foundation has developed ways of framing issues of common concern so that communities can work their way toward some kind of public choice.

Town halls or issues forums are one way that citizens can be engaged in governance, but there are other ways. John Lewis was an important leader during the civil rights era and demonstrated that acts of non-violent civic disturbance or activity could move us closer to our aspirational goals as a society. We had citizens engaged in nonviolent civil disobedience who were prepared to

be arrested because they were technically breaking laws they believed needed to be broken in order to shine a spotlight on the wrongfulness of those laws.

We also saw this in 2020 when, in the middle of a pandemic, American citizens were so horrified by the murder of George Floyd that they disregarded the threats to their own health and poured into the streets of cities around the country to protest what they were seeing and to say, "this is not a reflection of what I believe this country stands for."



Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman speaks during the inauguration of US President-elect Joe Biden on January 20, 2021, in Washington, DC.

Citizen engagement is an important part of the evolution of our democracy. There are many different ways that citizens can give voice to what they expect from their representatives in Washington, DC, or their own localities. One question we need to give more attention to is whether the voices of citizens are actually being heard by representatives and whether there are ways of holding representatives accountable if they are not acting on behalf of their constituents.

London: We often speak of democracy as something we estab-

lished a long time ago that we may now be in danger of losing. But it might be more accurate to think of it in aspirational terms. I'm reminded of the words of Amanda Gorman, the young poet who spoke at President Biden's inauguration ceremony. She spoke of democracy as "the hill we climb"—as the destination we have not yet reached, or the promise we have not yet fulfilled.

Davies: I think that's absolutely right. Our founders very intentionally turned their backs on the idea of rule by a monarch or by despots and instead placed the power of our

self-governance in the hands of “we the people.” But at the time those beautiful words were written, this was more of a promise than a reality. If we look at it with clear eyes, we have to acknowledge that when the founding documents were written only a very small part of our population was actually given the power or authority to participate in their own governance.

Throughout our history, every time we have moved a little closer to those ideals, we have done it by expanding the pool of citizens with the authority to participate in self-governance. Every time we have moved a little closer to our aspirational ideals, we have done it by being more inclusive. That is our North Star. We should really understand and celebrate that. Our strength actually lies in the diversity of our citizenry.

London: I realize these are still early days and you are still settling into your new role, but what can you say about what you hope to accomplish as president and CEO of the Kettering Foundation? If we look ahead to the 100th anniversary of the foundation, which is five years away, what one or two things would you hope to accomplish by then?

Davies: I would say that I think it's essential that the Kettering Foundation be engaged in the battle to



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It's going to require a lot of us. We are thinking about what that work might look like. And we are asking ourselves, what are the most acute needs of democracy right now? And, how might we organize our work in order to help meet those needs? I'm happy to say that our staff is very engaged in that process. We are actually utilizing our strength in issue framing and deliberation to go through that exercise.

It's a very inclusive project. It will include the thoughts and wisdom of our network of associates and allied organizations. I'm having high-level conversations with leaders of respected peer organizations that are also focused on democracy and democratic health. And we are learning a lot, as we always like to do here at the Kettering Foundation. At the end of the learning process, we will set some strategic goals for ourselves and hold ourselves accountable.

London: What are some of the ways the Kettering Foundation can make its research more visible and accessible to the public in coming years?

Davies: I think it calls for me, as the president and CEO, to be visible and to talk about what we are doing, what we are learning, and what we believe democracy demands of us right now. So, I expect to elevate my own public role, as well as that of

our program officers who make up an incredible team of researchers deeply committed to this project of citizen-led democracy. I'm hopeful that the country will see a lot more of them in the days to come as we focus on these acute challenges.

London: How would you describe your own style of leadership?

Davies: I think of myself as a deeply collaborative leader, one who believes firmly in the power of team. I've always thought that a leader is only as strong as the team they have the privilege of leading. So, I focus very much on the needs of the team and how we can act successfully together.

I will say that I'm very comfortable being in front of rooms, on panels, giving keynotes and other addresses. I've had decades of experience talking about important issues facing the country, and I expect that will be an important part of what I do. But I hope that I'm also communicating that I understand the strength of the Kettering Foundation never comes down to a single individual. It's always going to be thought of broadly as our wonderful staff and this incredible network that we have built over time and will continue to expand. ■

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