

## Is democracy the worst form of government?

Written by May Le (October 2008)

*'Democracy is the most valued and also the vaguest of political terms'.*

The term democracy originates from the Greek 'demos' meaning the people and essentially, the original meaning is 'people rule'. Democracy was founded on the direct democracy of Ancient Athens, where 'free' citizens participated in the governance of the polis (city-state) through the medium of the vote, debate and a majoritarian decision-making process. There are two fundamental tenets of democracy; firstly, it implies political equality - that all members of the society have equal opportunity to influence political decisions. Secondly, it involves political participation - active engagement by individuals and groups in utilizing the aforementioned opportunity through playing a role in the governmental processes that affect their lives. However with the significant increase in population, institutions and bureaucracy of modern society, upholding these fundamental tenets of democracy has become increasingly difficult, impractical and unrealistic.

Direct democracy is where people who choose to participate are sovereign; such a system is clearly impractical and can only work in small states with relatively small numbers of people. Modern society, with its size and complexity, offers few opportunities for direct democracy. The other, most common and prominent form of democracy prevalent is representative democracy. Modern states such as the United States and most of the states within Europe adhere to this form of democracy, which evolves from direct democracy. Representative democracy aims to stay true to the original, principal precept of original democracy, namely 'people rule'.

*'Government of the people, by the people and for the people' – Lincoln*

Abraham Lincoln summed up the key features of representative democracy in his Gettysburg address of it being 'government of the people, by the people and for the people'. Though Lincoln's famous axiom furthered the idea of democracy, by us it may be construed as rather an idealistic desire rather than a realistic description. The failings and short-comings of democracy have existed for almost as long as the concept has been around. Of these, the lack of power of the people to influence the political process may be deemed one of the chief flaws of democracy, particularly in its representative form.

'The English think they are free. They are free only during the election of members of parliament.' Rousseau was implying that the only time the people really had a say or had any power in terms of political issues is during the election period; otherwise they are 'slaves; in chains'. In a liberal, representative democracy, the précis is that people trade their sovereignty via free and fair elections conducted on the basis of political equality in exchange for the opportunity to choose between different candidates and political parties vying for the power to govern over society. These elected representatives are then accountable to the people for their decisions and actions, as they are acting on behalf of society based on the sovereignty they have attained through the election process. In theory, if the people are dissatisfied, there should there be dissension amongst voters, criticism from citizens will ensue and a

new representative government be installed in the next election.

***'Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement' – Burke***

These elected officials endowed with transferred sovereignty are charged with deliberating on complex public issues and acting in the interests of the people who have voted them into power. This transference of sovereignty is partially forgoing one's civic democratic sovereignty and giving it to another who has more time and knowledge to make political choices, and to trust them to use this power for the good of society. To ensure they act in accordance with these terms and do not abuse the power they have been given, the fear of losing their power at the next election is supposed to encourage them to act in correspondence to the people's wants and needs. Secondly, another form of holding them to their office is to hold them to account during their elected time in office. However, once again in practice this proves to be difficult for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the electoral systems used to elect these persons are far from perfect and as a whole can result in a tyranny of the majority (a problem commonly connected to democracy, Aristotle). This is a key problem with the first-past-the-post electoral system (FPTP) commonly used in the UK, which results in minority parties and representatives being marginalized by the more popular majority parties (through more funding etc.) meaning not all the people are represented and distorting the true wants of society. Secondly, the fear of not being re-elected encourages the policies of the elected to result in consensus politics again resulting in populist majority-rule politics, where the most popular policies will prevail guaranteeing their re-election. Dissension therefore has no voice and as this is meant to be a safe-guard to protect and promote democracy, majority politics demonstrates the inefficacy of democracy as a form of government. Thirdly, holding elected representatives to account during their time in office is difficult as once elections are over, as previously mentioned in reference to Rousseau's argument, the power or sovereignty of the people is frozen as there are little or no efficient outlets for people to voice their dissatisfaction with the government in power.

While there are non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as charities, lobbyist associations, unions, and other critical outlets; these all once again rely on a significant amount of people to participate in order to actually have any effect on influencing the government. Voter apathy and political apathy in general is another factor that prevents true democracy from ever truly being effective as a form of government in an ideological sense, as democracy as 'people rule' is meant to be of all the people, not some, or a majority or even none (which is not democracy at all, but in fact totalitarianism). As more and more citizens seem to be less interested or willing to engage in political issues (in recent years the decline in voter turnouts and significant falling levels of party membership have been issues). One of the main arguments for apathy is the assumption people tend to think, their vote won't count; people may think that one party is bound to win and so voting for a competing party is pointless and a 'wasted' vote so decide not to vote. Another reason may be that there is little or no choice; an overlap in political values and aims to reach a common goal, questions whether there are any real alternatives.

Political consensus is the order of the day for politicians, as they no longer engage in politics for the love of politics and/or their genuine desire to improve conditions,

instead see it as a 'career', with a common goal to remain in/gain power, and do so without regard for what happens to society as a whole. Democracy is meant to imply choice however there rarely is. Democracy in practice of government fails to promote the competitiveness and fairness it holds dear in theory. Democracy is arguably the worst form of government as in its actuality; it fails to adhere to its own principles.

***'Were there a people of gods, their government would be democratic. So perfect a government is not for men' Rousseau***

Paradoxically, representative government at its purest and best, via proportional representation can lead (albeit arguably indirectly) to bad government; firstly in making government inefficient in carrying out its jobs of making and passing laws and governing society through a lack of consensus due to 'too many cooks spoiling the broth' i.e. too many opinions and interests which cannot be satisfied with limited resources and secondly through frustration at this, leading to extremism and fundamentalism. Examples of this are historically and presently prevalent; the Weimar government of 1919-1925 which failed despite being the most democratic of its age and leading to the rise of the Nazi party and today as seen in the numerous democratic governments mired in bureaucracy.

So if democracy is the worst form of government, which the numerous points made seem to support, what then are the alternative forms of government? There is anarchy which is the absence of government or 'without ruler', this form of government has its appeal in the sense that all people are free to do and act as they please, on the other hand with no government there will be absolute chaos, unchecked freedoms would mean no one would be accountable for their actions and this could and probably be a bad thing. Another form of government is oligarchy; this is a small elite group of society generally distinguished by royalty, wealth, family and military powers. This governmental system has its merits as they have the knowledge and time to make political decisions effectively however this form of government fails to include the interest of all as the people in power may act on their own interest. With both a monarchy and aristocracy the issue of hereditary and so this probably prohibits that them knowing and giving the people what they want and they too might act in their own interest.

***'Democracy is the worst form of government - except all the other forms which have been tried from time to time'. – Churchill***

All governmental systems have their flaws, including democracy. In theory democracy is a great concept and could be a good form of government however in reality it falls short of meeting its own criteria. This is due to the many reasons outlined during the course of this essay which include: the failings of the electoral systems to keep those in power in check, voter apathy, consensus of politics resulting in tyranny of the majority, the lack of choice; the two-party system and most of all its contradictory nature; instead of people having power they forego and transfer it within democratic government. But of the alternative forms of government, it can be deemed that democracy is the 'best of a bad bunch' and for all its flaws, the values on which democracy is built are sound. At least within democracy, there is a commitment, if not realised then certainly intended, to preserve and ensure equality and justice for all men. This is not true of the alternatives, which have been explored. As Churchill posited - 'Democracy is the worst form of government - except all the other forms which have been tried from time to time'.