

Preface

A New Political Ideal

Democracy in the sense of government by the people, as opposed to government for the people, is almost universally dismissed as impossible. There are too many of us, it is said. How can twenty thousand, let alone twenty or two hundred million people, confer together as equals, agree on a course of action and pursue it without recognised leaders? Further, it can be argued that even if this could be done, it would be a silly thing to do. Most people are ill-informed on most things, ill-educated, unable to grasp the true grounds of action or its remoter consequences and altogether unqualified whether one considers intellect, experience, or even inclination, to play an active part in political life. Finally, it is obvious that any democratic state that wanted a peaceful and effective existence would need a great deal in the way of routine and institutionalised procedure. There would have to be organisation. But once you have organisation, you have organisers, a developing hierarchy and a ruling class. This is an iron law and there is no breaking it.

The prosecution has a formidable case and it has been made more formidable by the intellectual weakness of the defence. The Greeks, who gave us the word democracy and were familiar with democracy in action, reflected often enough on its merits as a form of government and have left a good number of empirical and moral observations in its favour. But they never worked out a philosophy or metaphysics to go with it. Nor did the political thinkers of the Renaissance. These echoed the praise of the “mixed constitution” that they found in Aristotle and Cicero, and extracted morals of an anti-authoritarian nature from Roman republican history with the aid of Polybius and Livy, and in this way much accepted wisdom that had its origin in Greek democracy was transmitted to the modern world. But there was little or no full-blooded championing of unadulterated Greek democracy. It is true that ideas of a more thorough-going democratic kind were promulgated during the Commonwealth and Protectorate in seventeenth-century England. But they did not triumph and the academic image of good constitutional government remained essen-

tially Roman until some time after the foundation of the United States of America.

The extension of suffrage in nineteenth-century Britain was more democratic, but only in the passive sense of trying to secure a wider measure of popular consent to, and control over, a government that continued to be seen as members of the better classes chosen on merit. In the twentieth century, the reformers who have most effectively put themselves forward as fighting for the underdog have been the socialists and communists, whose primary interest has been in imposing their vision of the just society rather than in making it possible for people to shape their own destiny. The result is that there has never been an all-embracing defence of democracy, nor even a description of what a pure democracy on a large scale would look like, let alone a philosophy to stand behind it in the way that philosophies of idealism stand behind elitist doctrines of rule by an enlightened few.

To come forward after all this time with an offer to make good the deficiency might seem uncalled-for. Representative government by election has reached its full flower now that all adults of both sexes have an equal vote. Yet it has manifestly not managed to create civil societies in which everyone feels equally at home. Communism also had ample opportunity to show what it can do when it holds power. Whether or not it ever succeeded in its primary aim of bringing about a fairer distribution of goods, the cost in terms of stifling bureaucracy, loss of personal freedom and outright political repression has been far too high to be accepted by anybody who believes that individual character and individual enterprise are the fountains of life.

There are still practical improvements that can be made in the workings of both systems. These are well worth striving for. But there cannot be many people left who think that either system is the best possible, let alone the ultimate ideal of human government. Nor do the extra-constitutional solutions that have come forward in the late twentieth century – alternative societies, experiments in participatory democracy and Christian, Muslim or other religious revivalism – look at all convincing.

There is a constitutional candidate for the vacancy, and one which offers what is needed in terms of idealism: democracy by random selection of representatives from a community, otherwise known as sortition. At first sight it may look like a gambler's proposal, turning the clock back on all that the modern world has achieved in the way of opening society

to merit. But if we look at the record, we shall see that this is not so. Random selection in the appointment of governing bodies worked in ancient Athens and for centuries in Venice, two of the most successful states that have ever existed. It works with great success in English-speaking countries in the jury system. Moreover, thanks to modern mathematics, it is now possible to justify the principle of random selection, a thing that could not be done in antiquity or in the Renaissance. This is why the Greeks could not, but we can, have a theory of democracy.

It is the development of modern sampling theory, and the constant reminder of its successful application given us by the new art of the public opinion survey, that makes it possible to envisage an updated form of Greek democracy. This is what I have attempted to design. I shall not disguise my own partiality for the democratic cause, but this book is not a call to arms. Its approach is academic and its purpose is to survey the field before the bugle blows. It is a less exciting, but more useful aim. In defence of its utilitarianism, I cannot do better than quote the words of English philosopher and politician John Stuart Mill: "To enquire into the best form of government in the abstract is not a chimerical, but a highly practical employment of scientific intellect."

The first practical application of a theory of democracy is to prevent disillusionment. If the flag of democracy is hoisted in the ship of elections by universal franchise and the ship is abandoned because everybody despairs of it getting them where they want to get, then democracy will be lost too. This would be an unnecessary disaster. Universal franchise has little or nothing to do with democracy. It can at best yield government by consent. It is the friend of a ruling class. It is better for all concerned that the truth of this should be recognised, both for those who approve of the main existing system of one person, one vote at multi-year intervals, and for those who would like to see more direct popular participation in government.

Secondly, sortition puts a new option on the political agenda. In it, political campaigners in the democratic cause can see what they ought to be campaigning for. Those who are designing constitutions at whatever level, national or local, public or private, or who want to create representative bodies for consultative or decision-making purposes, will have another device at their disposal.

But its greatest benefit is for the ordinary person who looks around at the present state of things and wonders whether there can ever be a stable

political system which can provide both freedom and justice. It gives the most important thing of all: ground for hope.

A note to readers on the structure of the text

The book presents the case for sortition as a political thesis based on philosophical, historical and mathematical arguments. The vast majority of readers will not wish to be distracted with the academic details of these. I have therefore kept them out of the main text, which is written without footnotes and without the constant citing of names and references.

My hope is that this will make the main thesis stand out more clearly and enable it to be judged on its own merits. But it is obvious that many readers will also want to know where they can check on my evidence or find out more about the arguments. I have therefore added under the rubric Chapter Notes a kind of running commentary on the book, giving my sources, references to further discussions of the topic by others, and occasional expansions of my own. I hope that this method will not be found confusing, but will enable the reader to find out what he wants more quickly and more decisively than if he had a longer text with conventional annotation.

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