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The Essence of Democracy

The rise of democracy around the world offers a chance to move it closer to its ideals of justice and equality for everyone. But that is not a task that can be left to the politicians. It can only be done through ordinary people, because only they can make democracy thrive...

In the 16 years since the reign of the infamous "colonels" ended in Greece, the number of nations with democratic governments has nearly doubled. Dictatorships have fallen like dominos in every region of the world. Western political pundits have pointed out that many of the newly-liberated societies have "no tradition of democracy," and are therefore liable to backslide into authoritarianism. Maybe so; but it might be expected that, after all those years of worshipping democracy from afar, the mass of the people who have finally attained it will do everything possible to keep it alive in the face of reactionary assaults.

In this they will have at least one advantage over those who have lived under the system all along: they will not take it for granted. They will want to examine how it should work, how it does work, and how it can be made to work more effectively. They will think very seriously about these things because they realize that a society's form of government is a very serious matter. In places where people have been imprisoned, tortured and executed for the sake of democracy, they know what it is worth.

So at a time when the newly-empowered millions of Eastern Europe, Latin America and elsewhere are labouring on the foundations of democracy, we in long-standing democratic societies should be counting our blessings. The worldwide political renaissance now in progress also offers us a chance to review how well democracy is working in our own back yards.

What is democracy? The concept is neatly summed up in the Greek roots of the word: *demos* (people) and *kratia* (power). But to conceptualize it fully, you must also conceptualize "the people" as *all* the people: not just the affluent people, the educated people, the white people, the people with whom you share a religion or some other characteristic.

Often, those who clamour for "power to the people" really mean "power to *our* people." This was certainly the case with the ancient Athenians, who restricted participation in government to citizens, even though the majority of their city state's residents were either slaves or non-citizens. Females of any class were lumped among those who were not considered "people" for the purposes of governance.

"Our constitution is named a democracy, because it is in the hands not of the few but of the many," Thucydides explained. Therein lies the key contribution of the Greeks to democratic doctrine: the principle that laws should be made collectively by those who must live under them, not by individuals or small groups acting in their own interests above the law.

That principle was reasserted in 1215, when the English barons forced King John to sign the Magna Carta. The charter bound the British crown to recognize that its subjects had certain rights which it must solemnly observe. Since the only subjects to whom it applied were feudal autocrats, the Magna Carta had little reference to democracy as we now know it. But it did set off a constitutional process which indirectly led to the growth of democratic government.

From the very beginning the process depended on the compromise and barter which now form a democratic tradition. Monarchs needed money to support their courts and wars, and much of it came from taxes raised by the barons. The barons began making demands on the king and withholding their remittances until he had agreed with them on a course of action. Eventually they were joined by municipal officials called burgesses who were also in the position to withhold tax revenues until the king did something about their communities' grievances. When the parties

got together to coordinate their petitions, the assembly they formed was called "parliament."

The first step towards parliamentary rule was to include in the petitions demands for the removal of some of the king's counsellors. Soon "ministers of the crown" were unable to function without the approval of the body of citizens known as the House of Commons. Then groups in parliament began to compete to install their own members in the inner circle known as the cabinet. These "parties" asked the public to vote on which of them should be the largest group and thus control state policy. It was understood that those elected would have to represent the interests of their supporters if they expected to be elected again.

By the mid-17th century three of the basic elements of modern democracy had been established in

Watch out for democracy when everyone agrees on a single goal

England: consent of the governed, elected representative government, and freedom of speech in the form of immunity from arrest for statements made in parliament. All were subsequently

carried over into jurisdictions such as Canada which followed the British pattern. Other countries have different formulae for the practice of democracy which have evolved out of their peculiar cultures and histories.

Whatever the local differences, democracy everywhere is based on majority rule; but that rule is always conditional on the fair treatment of minorities. Majority opinion is susceptible to manipulation by demagogues who whip up primitive emotions which often find an outlet in the persecution of minorities. Majorities can also harm minorities out of simple indifference or ignorance. A true democratic regime therefore incorporates safeguards to protect minorities from majorities rolling over their rights.

Individuals are also shielded from potential abuses of majority power. Provisions in constitutions place certain fundamental rights such as the right to a trial beyond the authority of legislated statutes. Non-partisan tribunals, commissions and ombudsmen also function in various fields to check abuses of governmental authority. Above all, rights are protected by the rule of law, which decrees that governments themselves must obey the laws like any citizen. The laws are interpreted by independent judges exempt from interference by political authorities.

Democracy is said to be based on a "social contract" in which the individual surrenders certain freedoms for the good of the community, while the community protects that individual's freedoms in general. There has never been a definite dividing line

between the interests of the individual and those of the community. In fact, much of the political debate in a democracy concerns where and in what circumstances the line should be drawn. As long as that debate goes on, democracy maintains its vigour. Unanimity weakens the system. It is when virtually everybody is agreed upon a single collective objective that we have to worry about the health of democratic institutions. At such times, the voices of dissent may be shouted down, or may not be raised in the first place out of fear.

The threat to individual liberties from the whims of the majority has traditionally provided a justification for the ruling classes to restrict the right to vote to their own circle. For centuries British Members of Parliament were elected by the small fraction of the population which met the voting qualification of owning a large amount of property. The laws were such that only men with private wealth or access to government patronage could afford to sit in Parliament. Only in this century have M.P.s in Britain been paid, and all adult men and women allowed to vote in general elections.

Canadian women became eligible to vote on the federal level in 1917, somewhat earlier than in most countries. In general, conditions have been more conducive to the spread of democracy here than overseas. When Canada was still a collection of British colonies, ordinary folk owned their own land, which meant that most settlers met the voting qualifications. The Constitution Act of 1791, which created representative assemblies in the future Ontario and Quebec, gave Roman Catholics the right to run for office almost 40 years before their co-religionists were allowed to do so in Britain.

Nevertheless, it took a rebellion in 1837-38 to wrest power from the appointed cabals known as "family compacts" and bring democratic government to colonial Canada. Meanwhile, President Andrew

Freedom of the media is a necessity in a democratic state

Jackson of the United States was engaged in a similar struggle. "He clung to the simple belief," wrote a biographer, "that government must deal as justly with the poor as with the rich."

Money has always played a large part in democratic politics, either being quietly filched from the public coffers or being used to buy votes and political favours. Many the government contract has been secured by bribery.

As a general rule, however, there is nothing illicit about attempts to influence political decisions. As society grows more diffuse and complicated, more and

more interest groups may be seen trying to put their views across to policy-makers. In Canada, lobbying has lately been officially recognized as a valuable aid to informed democratic debate.

Most of the sins of politics are laid at the door of the party system, which nonetheless remains a pillar of democracy. One of these is patronage — the use of power to give supporters jobs or other favours at public expense. Other sins arise from a willingness to do anything to keep a party in power regardless of the long-term welfare of the people. “We shall have to fight the politician,” wrote the English cleric William Ralph Inge, “who remembers only that the unborn have no votes and that since posterity has done nothing for us we need do nothing for posterity.”

“I always voted at my party’s call,/And never thought of thinking for myself at all,” sings an M.P. in Gilbert and Sullivan’s *HMS Pinafore*. It has always been open to argument whether elected representatives should vote according to their personal judgment, according to the views of their electors, or according to the party line. They usually take the latter course except in vital matters of conscience. There must be numerous lesser cases when they vote for party policy when they do not believe in it. But party discipline is not as undemocratic as it appears on the surface. Parties have legislative caucuses in which members make their views known on the policies their party will follow. They also hold conventions in which resolutions guiding their policies are adopted by a majority of their “grass roots” members. Finally, as R. MacGregor Dawson and W.F. Dawson remind us in their *Democratic Government in Canada*, parties can only be as corrupt or opportunistic as they are permitted to be: “Dissatisfied citizens can always join a party and try to influence it; or start a new one.”

Even the most sceptical political observers would have to admit that inter-party competition curbs misrule by subjecting the governing party to the relentless scrutiny of its rivals. In this the opposition is strongly supported by the media. So fundamental is freedom of the press to the democratic process that the media are regarded as an intrinsic part of the legislative apparatus — the “Fourth Estate of Parliament.” The media are also central to the exercise of “direct” democracy designed to put pressure on the authorities through demonstrations and other unofficial methods which rely on publicity. Anyone who doubts the importance of the media in preserving our freedoms need only look to the fact that the first act of any totalitarian government is to impose censorship.

Like many other features of modern democracy, a free press has its irritating aspects. Much of the “in-

formation” purveyed by political journalists is incomplete or inaccurate, and they frequently misinterpret the facts. By blowing small matters out of proportion and encouraging vain politicians to perform and preen, they help to trivialize the law-making process. Such annoyances, however, are included in the price of democracy. While watching tedious street demonstrations or listening to single-issue zealots brazenly distort the truth, it is salutary to remind ourselves how grim the alternatives to all this noisy nonsense can be.

Included in the nonsense is a lot of posturing, hyperbole, finger-pointing and self-congratulation. When we feel that our intelligence has been insulted by these theatrics, we may console ourselves with the saying that any party that takes credit for the rain will be blamed for the drought. And there are elements of drama and spectacle in politics which can make it quite entertaining. Democracy is the only system of government that can be fun.

The show-business aspect of the system adds to the impression that it feeds on vulgarity and ignorance. Elitists claim that, by bending to the public will, democracy panders to the lowest common denominator of society. But the record shows that the educational levelling in a democratic society is upward rather than downward. Democracy, wrote the American

critic James Russell Lowell, “is supposed to reduce all mankind to a dead level of mediocrity in character and culture, to vulgarize men’s conceptions of life, and therefore their code of

morals, manners and conduct — to endanger the rights of property and possession. The real gravamen of the charges ... lies in the habit it has of making itself disagreeable by asking the Powers that Be at the most inconvenient moment whether they are the powers that ought to be.”

Political leaders trying to get out of awkward situations often prove distressingly quick to jettison democratic principles. They are never short of excuses to violate democratic rights just a little, just this once: The people do not understand the question; the matter is too urgent for prolonged discussion; there are national interests at stake which take priority over moral niceties. Impatient types find the democratic process clumsy and slow, and in their frustration, they will try to circumvent it. Some will go further when the system produces decisions they do not agree with. They will try to reverse the result through subterfuge, sabotage or force.

Not only does it require patience to live with the democratic system, it requires moral courage. Peo-

*The system calls
for moral courage
and trust in the
public’s judgment*



ple must be prepared to go along with majority decisions which are personally abhorrent to them. Democracy entails taking the chance that most of the people in a given place will approach political issues fairly, unselfishly and humanely. Fortunately, as William Godwin noted, the system itself has a civilizing influence: "Democracy restores to man a consciousness of his value, teaches him by the removal of authority and oppression, to listen to the dictates of reason, gives him confidence to treat other men as his fellow human beings, and induces him to regard them no longer as enemies against whom to be on his guard, but as brethren whom it becomes him to assist."

The system presupposes that there are certain duties which the average citizen is expected to fulfil, including voting and serving, if called upon, in elected offices at all levels. It depends heavily on what the philosopher William James called "the civic genius" of the people — the knack of voting wisely, smiting corruption swiftly, dealing with opposition honourably, and "knowing good men when they see them, and preferring them as leaders to rabid partisans or empty quacks."

The world would be a better place if politics were always so straightforward, but democracy in practice rarely approaches such perfection. Those who pretend that it *is* perfect — who talk about the sacred

and inviolable traditions of democracy and the like — will usually be found to be defending some loophole in the system which favours their interests and which others want to change.

The danger is that cynicism, apathy and neglect will sap its ability to do its job

The danger in newly-democratized countries today is that people will believe that democracy is indeed an ideal political instrument which will solve all their social and economic problems. When it inevitably fails to do so, they may turn to blunter ways of doing things which promise quicker and more conclusive results.

Far from being perfect, democracy is, as Winston Churchill is said to have said, the worst political system yet devised — except for all the others. In the wrong hands, it lends itself to ruthless ambition, power lust and greed. It is vulnerable to hijacking by ideo-

logical bullies while the majority complacently occupies itself enjoying its benefits. One of the ironies of politics is that would-be dictators with a basic contempt for the electorate can so easily use the machinery of democracy to make it to self-destruct.

The persistent attempts to rig, subvert, sabotage or reverse the system contradict the comfortable assumption that, once in place, its obvious advantages will guarantee its eventual victory over the forces of tyranny. On the contrary, history teaches that, to survive the constant beating it takes, democracy needs constantly to be renewed.

The master American politician Al Smith caught the idea of democracy as a perpetual recommencement when he declared: "The cure for all the ills of democracy is *more* democracy." Surely there is no jurisdiction in the world that would not benefit from "more democracy," provided it is of the constitutional kind which incorporates judicial safeguards for minorities. Even in the most democratic of countries, the system has fallen far short of its implicit aim of eradicating the oppression, injustice and inequality that continue to afflict large sections of mankind.

It may, indeed, be foolish to expect a political system alone to right these historic wrongs in the absence of supporting factors such as greater mass education. But we who live day-by-day with its blessings can at least see to it that, wherever we have any control over the situation, democracy does not regress. We should recognize that it must be continually renewed, and that its renewal is not a job we can safely leave to self-interested professionals. It can only be carried out by the great majority who hold the ultimate power and thus the ultimate control over the system's future wellbeing.

We are all accustomed to hearing dramatic rhetoric about the battle for democracy and the like; but in a country like ours, there are no signs that the system is in mortal danger. Rather, the danger is that it will not have the strength to continue to advance, having been weakened to the point of ineffectiveness by cynicism, apathy and neglect. If we as citizens wish to keep the system strong, all we have to do is start participating in it. By becoming an active part of the process, we can do our best to see that democracy not only survives, but is healthy enough to press on with its work.

