

## POLITICS AND DEMOCRACY

### NOTE

***Prompted by Gordon Brown's book my intention is to add this to other fragments and drafts to construct an overall article on how we have got into our current mess. Parts of this have appeared on my website before. There are no endnotes in this version.***

**The Greeks, particularly the Athenians, gave us these words and because they pondered upon meaning so much we see them as concepts for us to define, re-define and again to re-define. The Athenians did not, however, invent discussion or all variants of group decision-making. We constrain ourselves if we imagine that in order to define Politics and Democracy our only reference point is ancient Athens. My question is: while we have been making free with the words Politics and Democracy have we allowed them to become empty concepts?**

Nevertheless, those Greek words have a gravitational pull and Aristotle, the great conceptualiser, refuses to leave the stage. In *Of The People By The People, A New History of Democracy* (2011) Richard Osborne alerts us to the tendency to conceptualise but by beginning his book with the Greeks he firmly plants in the mind the notion that we are dealing with a Greek/Athenian invention. John Keane in *The Life and Death of DEMOCRACY* (2009) also begins with the Greeks but provides a perspective on the development of democracy that allows us to take into account societies far beyond Greece.

I see **POLITICS** as the inclusive discussion of and consensual arrival at public values. In my opinion defining it as the struggle for or the games that people play to obtain power is to seriously undermine and devalue it's meaning. I find it disappointing that so many politicians and commentators upon the actions of politicians effectively see politics as a dirty game of manipulation. Reading Brown's book I found it necessary to stay alert to signs of what I regard as the misuse of both word and concept. It is the same with any book written by a politician. They tend to believe that politics is defined as what politicians do. Too often what they do is to hurt politics.

**DEMOCRACY** can be perceived in a number of ways. The Peasants Revolt of 1381, the Putney Debates of 1647, the French Revolution of 1789 are among many examples of people exerting a right to participate in governmental decision making. To sit on the far right in the French Assembly of 1789 indicated your preference for absolute government in the form of a monarch. To sit on the far left indicated your preference for wide participation. I keep this in mind when I hear or read the words Right Wing and Left Wing used as labels for political behaviour. This, of course, places Tony Blair far to

the right. And having worked in a local authority run by Militant Tendency it is also where I would place them.

We may find it comforting to tell ourselves that we live in a democracy but when we make our votive offerings to the Goddess Demokratia we seldom notice that after we have left the temple the Goddess Oligarkia has crept in to steal them. This, I believe, is as good a description of the referendum on membership of the EU as many.

Some reviewers of Brown's book judge him to have been a less effective prime minister than his predecessor. Making that judgment indicates to me a current belief that prime ministers must be on the absolutist side of the left/right spectrum. Brown describes his efforts to restore cabinet government and a proper relationship with the civil service. I see that as neither weak nor foolish, although he had previously done his bit to drastically reduce civil service numbers. In his book he makes use of Macmillan's famous reply when asked what could throw government off course: 'Events, dear boy, events.' He also makes use of Wilson's 'A week is a long time in politics.' This gives the impression of someone surprised by the job: by the lack of control he had compared with his role as Chancellor. Possibly he should have taken note of Mike Tyson, the boxer, who said that everyone has a plan till they get punched on the mouth.

'Overwhelmed' is the word used by some to describe Brown as prime minister, probably because, as he explains in his book, he came to believe that times had changed and prime ministers were now constantly 'in the thick of it'. Quite possibly his early developed sense of responsibility and attention to detail exacerbated the problem in his eyes, though he did try to spread power across his government. He was, of course, constantly under attack from, particularly, the Murdoch press who had previously supported Blair.

But it concerns me that we appear to have formed the notion that only the seeming to be strong (and stable) can be in charge. Theresa May has demonstrated the limitations of that belief, certainly as an empty electioneering war cry. Yes, Blair had a lot of control but it was based upon carefully crafted narratives (often lies) and the tendency to keep chucking short-term policies at the electorate rather than to think even medium term. His long term amounted to slogans such as 'aspiration' and 'choice' and 'modernisation.'

To put it in a different way, strength and stability can emerge from democracy. They do not have to reside only within autocracy. I would argue that part of Brown's problem as prime minister was that he tried to take some steps towards democracy (and politics) at a time when too many people had come to believe that effective government was autocratic government: government with little politics.

Both politics and democracy require truth. Lies pervert politics and damage democracy. The referendum on EU membership was neither politics nor was it democracy. It was manipulation.

**Did Brown do politics? Where might he have sat in the French Assembly? Is Jeremy Corbyn a threat to society because he sits slightly towards the left?**

Brown's book provides abundant evidence of early development of a social conscience together with the urge to do something to give effect to it. So much of his early life seemed to be spent writing, campaigning, organising, canvassing and, as ever with the Labour Party, in meetings. I think that was doing politics. Later on I am not so sure.

His 'pact' with Blair, if that is the right word, gave him enormous power over much domestic policy. But for two politicians to effectively say to each other, 'You have that bit and I'll have this bit and after a while I shall stand down and you can have my bit', well, is that even close to my definition of politics? Does it fit any definition of democracy no matter how conceptualised? The Labour Party had (still has) properly established procedures for selecting its leaders. Yes, there have always been internal stitch-ups, punch-ups, deals and a little light back stabbing but my objection to this pact derives mostly from seeing the damage it did to politics and to democracy. They became about power: obtaining it, keeping it and seizing it.

**Later I hope to say something about the contribution of that 'pact' to allowing a relatively unhindered and unchallenged Blair to act on our behalf as a war criminal.**

### **Further Reflection**

**In terms of **Politics and Democracy** It is not easy to work out where to begin in order to make positive changes. This is only a small fragment of what can be said on the subject but, hoping to stimulate critical conversation, I suggest that we might go back to 1829 for guidance. It was an interesting time. The year before gave us the Catholic Emancipation Act and three years later during a time of relatively well-behaved revolution in a number of European countries Britain began to expand its franchise. That came from the so-called 'Great' Reform Act. A year later we got the first Factory Act. It was a time when a number of prominent Tories perceived a need to put on liberal clothing. I begin, however, in 1951.**

In that year Attlee's Labour Party won the popular vote but, because of our electoral system, lost power. As Brown points out in his book, at the general election of 2010 fifteen million people voted against austerity and only ten million voted for it. We got austerity. There was a slight difference then because, having told the electorate that they were against austerity and, famously, tuition fees, the Liberal Democrats endorsed Tory policies when offered a role in the Coalition Government. The ability to rationalise away values for the possibility of power is, for so many politicians, an innate talent.

I believe that our parliamentary electoral system is anti democratic. In the run up to the 1997 election Tony Blair flirted outrageously with proponents of proportional representation, specifically with Roy Jenkins. His fear of only a tiny and insecure win drove him to consider the change. A thumping power-granting win changed his mind. Yes, it was almost certainly the case that newly elected Labour MPs had no wish for change but his own party was seldom allowed to impede Blair when he was set upon something that he wanted. It seems that he only wanted proportional representation if it led to power. The question is, how do we persuade politicians to give a higher value to representation than to power? 1964 was a very close run general election and 1974 provided two of them. They did not change the minds of power hungry politicians. What might?

I hope this is more than a fantasy but Jeremy Corbyn has, I believe, gone some way to opening up political discourse to accept concepts such as 'fairness'. But is he really a stick-in-the-mud party loyalist? How far might he go to make common purpose with the Greens, for example? They have only one MP but their political significance might be very widespread. The values for which they stand strike chords that can turn into votes. Those votes might be long lasting because so many young people appear to share those values. And not just young people: think of people campaigning against fracking. These are people frustrated when their voices are not heard by local government as it comes under pressure from central government, particularly a central government whose best friends are, too often, international corporations. I suspect that the political land between Labour and the Greens is under explored.

If we had a government that reversed the simple minded mantra of 'Private Good, Public Bad' I believe that we could make some progress. Since 1979 the basic assumption of our governments has been that things are better when companies compete for contracts to carry out public work. Not only do those contracts go to the lowest bidder who, as a consequence, must cut corners to make a profit, but also the commercial confidentiality card is played: unlike a local government committee the public cannot attend a board meeting or obtain easy access to minutes. We have a democratic disconnect.

What might turn my fantasy into a nightmare are those people inside the Labour Party who still yearn for Blair and those that appear to be obsessed with constructing false allegations of racism against supporters of the indigenous people of Palestine. In other words, to support the point I have repeatedly made about the referendum on membership of the EU, too much of what we are often fooled into thinking are political processes are actually battles for the control of a party. And, too many politicians seek ignorance in order to comfort their prejudice.

**While Cameron, Boris and Gove were fighting for control of the Tory Party the interests of the country were hardly considered. Theresa May has only one priority: to remain as party leader. She will do a deal with the devil to keep her job. Some would say that she has.**

It often occurs to me that we might have unknowingly come close to a written constitution (or at least a suggestion for one) in 1829 when the Conservative Home Secretary of the time, Robert Peel, endorsed the following **Principles of Law Enforcement**. Their theme is policing by consent and Principle 7, in particular, just needs the substitution of the word 'government' for the word 'police' for us to envisage what it might mean if the notion that

***the government are the public and the public are the government***

became a basis for government and politics. Here is the full set of principles.

[https://www.durham.police.uk/About-Us/Documents/Peels Principles Of Law Enforcement.pdf](https://www.durham.police.uk/About-Us/Documents/Peels_Principles_Of_Law_Enforcement.pdf)

**Might they do service as the basis for discussion (very widespread and inclusive discussion) about the construction of a British Constitution supportive of inclusive decision making; or have we internalised the habits of subjects who tell themselves that moaning and voting from time to time means that they live in a democracy?**

## Conclusion

On **Politics and Democracy** I possibly spent too much time on the contrast between Blair and Brown but overall I conclude that both politics and democracy have been increasingly sidelined since 1979. It is almost the case that the more often we hear the word 'democracy' from the mouth of a politician the less we have of it. I frequently refer to the referendum on membership of the EU but it is a prominent case in point. Not only do I not see any democracy in it but I also believe it to have been anti democratic in four ways. It was not about 'we the people'. It was about control of the Tory Party. Second, it was an advisory referendum that, in order to increase his chances, David Cameron declared that he would regard as binding. He did not have the power to do that but his words changed the game. Third, democracy requires truth. We were told huge lies and to vote on the basis of a deliberately manipulated misunderstanding invalidates a result. Four, over the years and especially since 1979, we have not only been getting rid of civil servants but also treating them as agents of ministers. Add to that the incapacity of the House of Commons to scrutinise what will be several Everests of legislation as a result of Brexit and we can see why Theresa May's first thought was to make use of a prime minister's monarchical powers.

How great are our chances of restoring politics and democracy? Actually, 'restoring' might not be the best word. For a while after 1945 those twins seemed to have been given a boost and from 1951 to 1979 the Postwar Political Consensus possibly lulled us into believing that we were, despite disputes, differences and variable economic performance, on a pleasant plateau gradually making progress towards greater equality and happiness. In other words, politics and democracy as I defined them have never reached a steady state and they have never transformed us into a naturally participative

society. We remain subjects rather than citizens. So, to make progress do we have to chop off the head of the Queen?

We don't but we do need a written constitution. As John Keane points out, the constitution of the USA was designed by a few powerful people to suppress democracy. We can detect the rhetoric of Tom Paine in the US Constitution but its mechanics are quite different. It is a game of power to be played by those most able to pay their entrance fee to the casino. In 2002 Greg Palast's book used such a good title to express this, *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy*.

In 1975 Denis Lawton tried to encourage us to write a national curriculum. Key to writing it was to have been a thorough and widespread discussion of our social values. When England got a national curriculum in 1988 it was received from government, to be implemented by those denied the opportunity to construct it.

What are the chances of us even beginning to organise meetings of people in towns and villages to start talking about a contemporary version of Peel's Principles: Principles for Politics and Democracy? In all the major parties I believe that smelling the chance of power via the existing system is enough for them to postpone radical thinking and action. If we avoid widespread participatory radical thinking and action on politics and democracy we shall perpetuate unfairness, inequality and unhappiness. At present for most of the time most of us are disengaged from government. Has that been good for us? Do we prefer to be subjects rather than citizens?

**Cliff Jones, 13<sup>th</sup>. April 2018.**