

TOWARDS DEMOCRACY

We, in the UK, don't live in a democracy. I am not talking about the fact that the EU's iron grip has subjugated our 'mother of parliaments' (although that is also obviously true). Even if the EU element did not exist we would not be living in a democracy – not as the inventors of the word would know it. Our system of government would best be described as an 'elective oligarchy'. Every four years or so we elect an elite to rule over us and then for the next four years we are totally powerless – we are effectively serfs! Yes, we can chuck those in power out at the next election but until that election we have to rely on the restraint, good sense and the checks and balances in the system to ensure we are governed as we wished, as we voted.

The Greeks who invented democracy didn't see it like that. They believed that democracy was an ongoing process where the voters made all the important decisions whenever they needed to be made, at regular public meetings. The voters made all the big decisions. The only place in the modern world where this sort of democracy exists is in Switzerland where referenda are widely used and in some of the Swiss Cantons (the subdivisions of the country) the decisions are made by votes held at mass public meetings.

You can see why our form of 'representative democracy' might have evolved. Participation in a Greek system of democracy was time consuming and there are obvious benefits to passing the job over to a small band of 'representatives' so that the rest of the population could get on with the full time job of scraping a living from the land. However in 21st Century Britain these conditions no longer apply. We have ample free time to devote to a wide variety of leisure pursuits and we have modern communication systems that mean that we can participate in all sorts of mass 'on line' activities.

We also have an increasingly bureaucratic government which is regulating us more and more and is so resistant to change that large sections of the population believe they are disenfranchised and that voting is pointless.

So let us turn all this all on its head. Instead of having our politicians make all the big decisions lets only allow them to make the small ones. All major government decisions would be made through referenda. The party in power could propose legislation but so could anyone with sufficient public support (e.g. 250,000 signatures on a petition). These would then be batched up so that every month they would be put to the public vote. There would be three weeks of debate (on a dedicated TV/Internet channel) followed by a week of voting where the public could vote on-line from the comfort of their own homes or via public (electronic!) voting booths in libraries and community centres. Votes with sufficient participation would become binding on the government and the politicians would then be tasked with passing the supporting legislation. The House of Commons would remain elected as it is at the moment but the make up of the House of Lords (the body that acts as the check and balance for the Commons) would be made up by another Greek favourite – 'drawing lots'. The names of all citizens that were interested in participating would be put into a 'hat' and 600 drawn at random to serve for a term (well paid) as 'Lords'. This would ensure that the make up of the upper house was more representative of the country as a whole – so that they acted more like a jury and less like politicians. The original purpose of juries was to stop unjust laws being applied to the citizens of the country. If 'twelve good men and true' didn't think it was 'fair' then it wasn't. So to with these 'lords', if they didn't think that parliament was enacting the results of referenda as the voters intended or were seeking to abuse their powers without a referendum they would, like a jury, have the final say.

The beauty of this is that while this would be a major shift in the balance of power in the country, taking power from the professional politicians and giving it to the public, it isn't a major

constitutional change. Making referenda obligatory rather than at the gift of the government isn't a great change and updating the voting methods from the manual ticking of pieces of paper is long overdue. A change to the make up of the Lords, to take it out of the land of cronyism and patronage that it is at the moment, is also well overdue.

Incidentally, in these days of a disenchanting electorate who don't believe that they can make a difference and with political parties that all look the same, a political party that was offering to had power back to the voters could also be onto a vote winner! Politics also could become interesting again – Move over Big Brother....! On the 'House of Public' eTV channel there is a debate and vote on drugs legislation to participate in!

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