



A Moment Among My Reading

Some Problems With Modern Democracy

For the past few weeks I have been re-reading classical authors such as Thucydides, Herodotus, Pliny, and Tacitus. Which reading led to me to reflect upon the histories of the nations of the modern West and the form of government – the modern democracy – that they have developed and whether such problems as I, personally, perceive that such a form of government has may be detrimental to Western societies in the future.

Some Basic Problems

1. The first problem I perceive with modern democracy is that a country generally gets the leaders – presidents, prime ministers – and the government who and which tend to reflect, in their words, promises, and policies, the often changeable fears, hopes, and emotions of a majority of people at election time or at least of the percentage necessary to win an election; with such fears, hopes, and emotions often engendered by the Media, by a specific political party, by a 'social movement', and by 'special interest' (advocacy) groups or individuals with their own agendas, all of whom seek to influence 'public opinion' and the policies of politicians and governments. Such 'special interest' groups invariably include those with particular business and political concerns who have the financial resources to employ professional lobbyists, Media consultants, and propagandists.

The result is that the political party and/or particular advocacy groups who have the most money during elections campaigns, and who have the support of a substantial part of the Media, and/or who have a candidate for high office who is a persuasive public speaker, influence the result of elections, having persuaded or influenced the percentage of people necessary to win an election.

In other words, modern elections have become an often cynical process of targeting, persuading, and influencing, people (or specific types of people) by appealing to their fears, their hopes, their emotions, based on specific – and supra-personal – political, social, and business, agendas and interests.

In practical terms this means that the leaders tend to represent their own personal (sometimes emotive) and/or political agenda and/or the agendas of whatever 'special interest' groups have helped them get elected. Naturally they deny this, since they invariably and cynically declare that their policies and actions represent "the will of the people" – and thus that they have a mandate for those policies and actions – or they rather naively do believe that they have a mandate having a personality or the personal vanity which has made them a mere figurehead for 'special interest' groups and/or the political magnates of their own political party who themselves have their own agendas.

Over decades, the cynical process of targeting, persuading, and influencing, people results in changing governments, for with each new election a majority of people are persuaded or believe that "it will be better, different, next time" and that their hopes will be realized by electing a different president or a different political party or even by electing the same political party but with a different prime minister and some different politicians. Meanwhile, very little of substance changes for the majority. There may be some cosmetic changes, but public services often get worse, crime increases, with the poor staying poor, and the rich staying rich or becoming richer, immune or indifferent as the

majority of the rich are to declining public services, to social problems, and to increasing crime.

2. The second problem with modern democracy is that politicians in general and candidates for leadership positions in government do not have to have – and in these modern times are not expected by the public to have – practical character-revealing life-experiences; and thus to have undertaken deeds which have revealed that they are courageous individuals who in dangerous or difficult situations have placed the life of others and of their country before their own. Life-experience such as serving in the armed forces of one's country and being awarded a medal or medals for gallantry; or serving as a 'first responder' – such as a paramedic, or a police officer, or in the Fire & Rescue service – and thus having faced difficult, trying, and life-threatening circumstances.

Instead, all individuals have to do to qualify as a politician is to have powerful and influential friends, and/or have the support of a substantial part of the Media, and/or have the support of influential advocacy groups, and/or have adroitly played 'the political game' and thus have been selected by the political magnates of their own political party, and/or have personal wealth sufficient to buy their way into the Media or – through (sometimes secret) donations or other means – gain the support of influential advocacy groups.

The result is that in a modern democracy there is a leader, and a government composed of a majority of politicians, who have no courageous deeds to their name, who have no experience of 'front line' service to their country and to their people, but who send people to fight wars, who make and enforce policy for the 'front line' services of their own land, and who can and who do, and based on some supra-personal political agenda, impose sanctions on other countries and who thus cause suffering to the ordinary people of those other countries.

In other words, you have career politicians who have never proved their mettle – never been tested – in dangerous or difficult situations lauding it over those who have.

3. The third problem with modern democracy is that modern politicians – with only a few exceptions – have mastered and use the art of propaganda, evident in their inability to be open and honest about their own failings and culpability while in public office, and in their inability to be honest about the failure of the policies of their government. Instead, they are adroit at manufacturing excuses, or shifting the blame away from themselves and government policies, or are disingenuous when answering questions or when addressing concerns about their culpability or that of their government.

4. The fourth problem with modern democracy is that, as a consequence of the aforementioned three problems, there is not "government by the people for the people" but instead government by a generally self-serving or advocacy-driven clique. Which political clique is generally wealthier – for politicians are paid well and often have other sources of income – than the majority of the electorate they were elected to serve.

Consequences

Since modern democracy is today still considered by the majority to function reasonably well in terms of maintaining society, it will remain for that majority the only viable option. For its inherent cynical process of targeting, persuading, and influencing, people will work so long as a majority can be persuaded that, after the next election, "it will be better, different," with the self-serving or advocacy-driven political clique well-understanding the *Psychologie des Foules*.

Thus, the always well-off political clique will continue to laud it over the poor and those whose 'front-line' public service keeps society functioning. The self-perpetuating political clique will continue to make excuses for their own failures, for declining public services, for government failure to solve social problems, and for increasing poverty, homelessness, and crime.

Mass discontent, as for example in the anti-war protests before and after the invasion of Iraq, strikes, scandals about corrupt politicians, even occasional riots, have not impacted significantly on the self-perpetuating political cliques: a change of leadership, some new policies, the dismissal or the resignation of a few politicians, propaganda by the Media, perhaps the election of a new government, are usually all that is required to maintain the democratic 'status quo'.

A study of history, ancient and modern, indicates – at least to me – that such manipulation of the many by the few for the benefit of the few cannot, given human nature en masse, continue indefinitely. That there may well arise such a breakdown of basic services, such perceived inequality, such perceived injustices, such widespread discontent, that revolution, somewhere – peaceful or otherwise – seems almost inevitable, with the attendant suffering that revolutions often cause. Thus will the cyclical nature of human history repeat itself, for we humans apparently have not changed, en masse, significantly enough so that we are personally guided by such virtues as honesty, reason, and εὐταξία to thus be immune to the propagandistic machinations of politicians, demagogues, ideologues, and special interest groups. Instead, it seems that the same fears, hopes, and emotions, still guide us, just as the negative traits of old seem to still guide so many of those few who have, by whatever means, acquired power and authority over the majority.

Can this apparently inevitable suffering-causing cyclicity – such as that of governing cliques and their overthrow, and of the decline of societies – be avoided? My own personal – and admittedly fallible – answer is to reform modern democracy so that leaders and politicians must have such personal character-revealing experience as qualifies them to lead and to govern, with that personal experience consisting of proven and years-long 'front line' service to their country and to their people such as in the armed forces or serving as a 'first responder' in such occupations as paramedic, a police officer, and in the Fire & Rescue service.

However, such a reform by having character-revealing experience as a qualification for political office is unlikely to occur, given vested interests and – dare I say it – an education system which has neglected study in their original language of authors such as Thucydides, Herodotus, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Aristotle, Pliny, Tacitus, and Cicero.

So many times, in the past somewhat turbulent decade of my life, I have reflected upon a particular verse by Sophocles:

πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ κούδὲν ἀνθρώπου δεινότερον πέλει [1]

For this seems to me to capture something of our rather strange human nature – of our ability, our potential, our capacity, to be honourable, self-restrained, rational human beings, and our seemingly equal capacity (or often, greater capacity) to be unsympathetic, insensitive, selfish, dishonourable, untrustworthy, or just plain barbaric.

David Myatt
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[1] Antigone, 334. My translation: "There exists much that is strange, but nothing has more strangeness than we human beings."

Source:

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Antigone at the grave of Polynices, Greek vase, Louvre

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