

DEMOCRACY – LESSONS FROM BRITISH HISTORY

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In all countries around the world, when only the rich were educated, it made sense for the Pharaohs, Kings, Queens and Tsars of the time to govern us; but that time is confined to history. Education forms inquisitive minds. The educated are better equipped to analyze problems, and through rational deduction, to come up with solutions to them. Whatever our chosen area of study, we apply the same tools to the society we live in. The educated form opinions on society, and feel compelled to act on them. As our societies in the West and in the East become more educated, more people are becoming aware of the issues within, and more people want to have their say. Democracy gives people that power; or at least it should do.

In Britain, where I am writing from, the concept of Parliamentary democracy was born. To understand why, we need to look at this in context of the history and geography of Britain. In the modern world, the idea has spread, and been adapted. In many cases this beautiful idea has been corrupted by elitism, by corporatism and by party politics; even here.

Being an island nation, throughout history Britain has been a safe haven to waves of migration from around the world. It is a trading hub where cultures mix and ideas flourish in the relative stability provided by the sea that surrounds us. Our ancient semi-historical texts speak of Old Syrians (possibly Israelites) arriving in 1500 BC, Trojans in 500 BC, and even of King Arthur and his Knights of the round table; although little of this is accepted by modern historians. It is a romantic view of history that has attracted many, including former Kings of England. Perhaps one day we will know the truth, but regardless of whether it is historically correct or not, the idea of a round table of equals is embedded in the mindset of the nation. The adoption of the Christian faith over paganism was also an important precursor to democracy. Britain has been a safe haven for Christianity since the 1st Century AD; there is even a legend that Jesus spent his adolescent life here, a legend that is encapsulated in the anthem Jerusalem. Little is certain in this period of our history. One thing historians do agree on is that Constantine the Great served in Britain for many years with his father prior to converting the Roman Empire to Christianity.

The Romans had a profound impact on Britain, but after the fall of the Roman Empire, Britain was left undefended and was overcome with migration from Angles, Saxons and Jutes (Netherlands, Germany and Denmark), and then Vikings (Norway, Sweden). Each brought with them part of their

culture, but all gradually converted from Paganism to Christianity. Anglo-Saxon England was a collection of Kingdoms, and the Counties of Essex, Sussex, Wessex and Middlesex all derive their names from East, West, South and Middle Saxons. This period of history lasted from the 5th Century until 1066 AD when the Normans arrived. Each Kingdom was governed by a King under the council of a 'Witenagemot', which consisted of senior members of the Church and nobility. These councils had considerable power, and in some cases even elected the King. These are the earliest historical traces of democracy in Britain.

However, it all changed in 1066 AD when William the Conqueror led the Normans (from France) in the invasion of Britain. Most of the Castles that exist today in Britain were built during the bloody Norman conquest of Britain. The semi-democratized British were put under the control of the arrogant Norman Kings, who demanded from them their allegiance, taxation, but offered little in return; the people were not happy about it. This struggle is encapsulated in the legend of Robin Hood, and in particular in the recent film with Russell Crowe. It took a few hundred years, and crumbling finances, but eventually the Barons persuaded the then King John to sign a charter of rights for the people, called Magna Carta, which was signed 800 years ago at Runnymede near Windsor. This milestone document made the King and the people both answerable to the Law, and is the first time that freedom and the right to a fair trial by Jury was granted under Law. After Magna Carta, the King of England started to listen once again to his people, and the Privy Council (like the Witenagemot of the Anglo-Saxons) was re-established to advise the King; an organization that still exists to this day.

In the period that followed Magna Carta, the King met regularly in Westminster with the Barons to discuss and agree changes in taxation. Parliament, from the French word 'Parler' or 'to speak' was the name given to these meetings. It was during the reign of Henry III in the 13th century that Parliament underwent substantial reform; following the King's allocation of privileged positions to his friends, and protecting them from the law. It was the nobleman Simon de Montfort who stripped powers from the King and assembled a Parliament of Knights and Burgesses from all around the Nation, in what we now call the House of Commons. Through a number of reforms in the centuries that followed, the right to vote to determine who sits in the House of Commons was extended to more and more people; before finally universal suffrage gave the vote to all Men and Women over the age of 18.

Parliament consists of two equal Houses, the House of Commons and the House of Lords. The House of Commons consists of democratically elected representatives of the people, from which is formed a Government. The UK is broken up into 650 constituencies, with the people in each constituency (called constituents) electing a single Member of Parliament to

represent them. The Members of Parliament in the Commons typically belong to a Political Party, but can also stand independently and be elected provided they can gain enough support from their constituents. The ability for an individual to stand independent of any political party, have a realistic chance of being elected into Parliament, and have a realistic chance at influencing policy, is a critical feature of any true democracy. The House of Lords consists of appointed members, called Lords Temporal, who have been given a lifetime peerage to serve in the House, ideally in recognition of their knowledge and experience. Many of these Lords are retired Members of Parliament. The House also includes a number of Bishops called Lords Spiritual. Either House can propose legislation through a Bill, but this must have the approval of the other House before it is sent to the Queen for Royal Assent, where it becomes Law. Bills often pass between the Houses a number of times, undergoing changes until both Houses agree. Whilst the Commons provides democratic and accountable Government, the Lords provide a second level of scrutiny for new legislation, one informed by the wisdom of experience, and that is less susceptible to party political influence. It is this two House structure of Parliament that has provided Democratic and Stable Government in Britain for hundreds of years. This does mean that on rare occasions the Government, who reside in the House of Commons, does not get what it wants, but in such cases this is generally the Lords telling them that they need to go away and think through the consequences of the legislation they are proposing.

Following two World Wars, there was a desire for peace in Europe, and at a speech in 1946 our Prime Minister William Churchill called for the building of a 'United States of Europe'. This was meant primarily to unite Germany and France, but has grown beyond anything Churchill imagined. Different nations joined for different reasons. In 1973 the UK joined what was described to the people as a 'common market'; a trade agreement. In reality we became members of a Union with no fixed rules, and that through an ongoing series of treaties removed the Sovereignty of its members, forces upon them an increasing number of Laws their people did not ask for, and seeks ever closer political, economic and monetary union. Slowly but surely they are building a super-state to rival the United States of America, the Russian Federation and China. The structure of the EU is quite different to the UK Parliament. The EU has a Commission of unelected commissioners, who are the only people with the power to propose legislation, called a directive. The directive passes to the EU Parliament of elected members, and the EU Council which con-

sists of the heads of the member states. The Parliament and Council have the opportunity to propose changes, but must then agree on the final version within a time limit, or the directive is scrapped. The policy areas on which the EU has authority are increasing all of the time; to the point that now typically 75% of the new laws in a member state are made by the European Union, and the member state must accept and cannot change them.

Early on some people in Britain began to recognise that the motivations of the European Union stretched well beyond trade. The public have grown skeptical of the EU, which resulted in the formation of the United Kingdom Independence Party, led by Nigel Farage. The democracy described in this paper is cherished in Britain, and this is being eroded away by the European Union. The structures of the European Union are not democratic, although they pretend to be so. In principle you can stand as an individual for election to the European Parliament, but you would have to campaign across a constituency of 1 million people, which is unrealistic. Even for those that do get elected, Members of the European Parliament have no power to propose legislation. Instead, all of that power rests with unelected Commissioners, who are unaccountable to the people of Europe. The size and structure of the European Union silences the individual and transfers power from the people, to multi-national corporations and lobby groups. The European Union is not a democracy in any sense of the word. Fortunately, campaigning by Nigel Farage, by the UK Independence Party, and by the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy group in the European Parliament, is increasing awareness across Europe and in the UK. Thanks to them, the UK will have a referendum within the next two years on whether Britain should remain as a member of the European Union, or whether we should leave. It is a referendum about freedom, and the right to self-determination. When the time comes, Britain will vote to leave.

History has many lessons to teach us. Democracy was invented in ancient Greece, adopted in Britain and refined over the past two thousand years or so. The resulting Parliamentary democracy has been exported all around the world. Freedom and the right to self-determination is a powerful message. However, democracy is not without its challenges.

Democracy works well in small countries with a population under about 50 million, but it struggles beyond this. The size limitation comes from structure of Parliament itself. Firstly the number of people that can be put in a room together whilst still being able to communicate effectively is finite, and probably about 500. Members of Parliament must be able to get to know one another, and get to know who shares similar opinions

on a range of issues. There are also logistical considerations to how many people you can fit in a room together whilst ensuring that they can all see and hear one another. The second limitation is the size of a constituency, which at the moment in the UK, is about 100,000 people. True democracy gives power to the individual. If a normal working person identifies a problem in society, or has a bad experience with the law working against them, then they must have a realistic chance of standing independently of any political party, getting elected into Parliament and changing it. They should not be forced to join an existing political party in order to do this. This means that over the course of 4 years that they and a few supporters should be able to formulate their ideas, and inform everybody in their constituency. The maximum constituency size is limited by logistics. If the task of distributing leaflets to 100,000 people was shared over 4 people, and they spent every weekend for a year delivering them, they would each have to deliver 25,000 leaflets or 500 leaflets every weekend for a year.

Then there is party politics. Political parties are wonderful for promoting political discussion between likeminded people, and for helping to develop individual ideas into thought out policies. However, they frequently go beyond this. It is not uncommon for a party to ask, and occasionally force its Members of Parliament to vote a particular way on an issue. The members of the party doing this are called the whips, and the process is arguably undemocratic, as even their name suggests. The first duty of a Member of Parliament is to the constituents that voted for him, and before voting on an issue he should discuss the issue with his constituents and after applying his own rational thought to the issue, decide how to vote.

This paper told the story of democracy in Britain, from its earliest origins, through to present day. The idea of freedom and the right to self-determination is a powerful one, but creating a system that is truly democratic is difficult. It is not as simple as giving the people the right to vote on everything. The first challenge is to produce a system of democratic and stable Government that is free from corruption, and is accountable to the people. The challenge then is to hold on to it.

The story of democracy in the Russian Federation hasn't even begun yet, but I am sure it will. With your foundations re-built on Christianity, and your Government spending enormous sums of money on education and giving young people the opportunity to attend conferences and courses around the world, democracy is inevitable.