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Democracy: is that all there is? Richard Swift thinks not

Richard Swift

There is a haunting 1950s song, made famous by the throaty voice of Peggy Lee, called “Is that all there is?”

Today we are all supposed to be enjoying a flowering of democracy. The Cold War is over. Politicians are duly elected, from Moscow (where the commissars have retired to their dachas) to Montevideo (where the generals have gone back to their barracks). True, the odd `rogue' dictator hangs on to power in Baghdad or Belgrade (there are even some up-and-comers in Pakistan and Cote d'Ivoire) but the writing is clearly on the wall. And, just in case it isn't clear enough, various Western political luminaries, like the self-satisfied Tony Blair or the unctuous Bill Clinton, give finger-wagging lectures to poor countries on human rights and proper electoral conduct. Indeed, the World Bank and International Monetary. Fund are proposing to punish those whose records on things like `transparency' and `good governance' are found wanting -- a far cry from the days when political and market stability were the flavour of the month and they both turned a blind eye to the corpses in the national stadium in Santiago or Indonesia's rivers of blood.

So, shouldn't we all be happy? Even the pessimists would have to say: at least it's a start. Well maybe ... Depends what you think democracy actually is. A few dissatisfied souls have the lingering sense that democracy means `rule by the people' -- in other words, people participate in the decisions that affect them most closely. If this is the criterion for democracy, we are a long way from it now.

Indeed, the kind of democracy we do have -- a highly centralized government in which we are `represented' by a class of professional politicians -- is starting to show a lot of cracks. In European countries, membership of political parties has fallen by nearly 50 per cent over the last 15 years. Helmut Kohl, the former German Chancellor, is just the

most prominent of a number of politicians caught trying to ensure their own survival by violating election-funding laws.

The level of popular cynicism about politics and politicians is at a high water mark. In country after country, voter participation is declining -- in some places, like the US, so precipitously that less than half of the electorate bothers to turn out even for high-profile national elections. Even in the countries of the former Soviet bloc the glow of democratic liberation is starting to fade and disillusion with politics-as-usual to set in.

A lot of people think that the fix is in and there is just no point. The political spectrum has narrowed, particularly in winner-take-all systems without any proportional representation. Labour in Britain has come to look like the Tories; Democrats in the US like Republicans. The Left and the Right have variations on the same agenda. It's all men in suits with perfect hair and smiles, using the same cheerful language to deliver the same bad news -- they win, you lose.

Centralization of political power is another symptom of the malaise. The big political parties are increasingly remote from voters. Members of the parties in convention see their policy resolutions routinely ignored by those they help elect; the rank-and-file back-bench has less control over the cabinet or shadow cabinet; the cabinet less control over the office of the President, Prime Minister or Premier. `Don't tie my hands!' is the cry used to drown out the sound of breaking promises and abandoned commitments.

A parallel centralization occurs between levels of government, where cities and regions (polities closer to most people than remote national states) are under the thumb of national politicians. As if this weren't enough, even nation-states are now subjected to pressures from institutions buttressed against popular opinion, like the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization.

Surely there was supposed to be more to it than this. But the theorists of democracy felt very ambivalent about this notion of `rule by the people' from its earliest days. The bright dreams of all the Lockes, Mills, even Rousseaus, were hemmed in by fear of mob rule and the overthrow of

property. As Ireton, Cromwell's right-hand man, told the uppity Levellers in the heady days of the English revolution: `Liberty cannot be provided for in a general sense if property is (to be) preserved.' So they drew back from the precipice and said only men with a certain amount of property could vote. And that these votes would be for `representatives' who would govern in their stead and retain as much independence as was necessary for maintaining political stability and good order. This was a negative kind of consent -- a freedom from arbitrary rule rather than a freedom to rule themselves.

Modern political science has inherited this distrust of ordinary people and their capacities to participate in their own self-government. Most political scientists stress questions of political management and effective elite systems of government. Participation (except passively, during elections) is not to be encouraged. As the political economist Joseph Schumpeter famously concluded: `Voters must understand that once they have elected an individual, political action is his [sic] business and not theirs. This means that they must refrain from instructing him about what he is to do.'

This basic thesis underlies much mainstream thinking about government. In recent years orthodox political science started to worry about `the governability of democracy' (the concept comes from Trilateral Commission intellectual Samuel Huntington) `overloaded' with unrealistic popular demands for economic security and political input. In other words, too much democracy.

But in one way the classic theorists were right to base their notion of democracy on access to economic power and hope for a `republic of smallholders'. You cannot separate economic power from political power. Under a corporate-dominated economy it is a joke to talk of `free and equal citizens'. No-one believes that the CEO of Phillip Morris (the tobacco company), who pumps millions of dollars into US political parties, is `free and equal' with a black welfare mother living in the slums of Richmond, Virginia. It is impossible to have a truly democratic government if you don't have a democratic society -- and our corporate-dominated society is actually a form of economic dictatorship.

The sense of not having a say, of letting someone else decide, of being `managed' is rooted in most people's work experience. It is hard to imagine a real democracy with work-dictatorship dominating our everyday lives. Economic power shapes political power. The eventual extension of the franchise to workers and women, after generations of hard struggle, failed to live up to the hopes of some and the fears of others for greater equality and democracy. Money and the publicity it could buy has flooded the political process, making those politicians who can get their hands on it (and are beholden to it) successful. The stranglehold of cash has led to the asphyxiation of honest public debate. With a few exceptions, economic outsiders (most of us) remain political outsiders.

That's the bad news; but the good news is that the democratic impulse just won't go away. A lot of people stubbornly cling to the idea that democracy means that they should get to decide. They refuse to accept the political scientist's limited notion of a democracy, where we only decide who leads us and then everything political is left up to them, with the resolution of basic economic issues left to the tender mercies of the marketplace. This intransigence is most visible in the popular explosions that ripped through Beijing in the late 1980s ... the force populaire of Haiti that risked the Ton Ton Macoutes death squads in the streets of Port-au-Prince ... the growing challenge to the theocratic authority of Iran's mullahs ... the decades-long stubborn resistance by the East Timorese in the face of the Indonesian jackboot.

In such situations the stakes are high and authority obviously arbitrary and abusive. But it happens in a million smaller, less-publicized democratic outbursts as well ... people who won't let them close the local school or let a developer put in a new road or housing estate ... people who rally to the defence of a besieged park or to prevent the abuse of the local ecosystem by industrial dumping ... People refuse in a myriad of ways to see why `the necessities of global competitiveness' should dictate a deteriorating quality of community life, just so the share prices of hi-tech stocks and the profits of currency speculators can remain `buoyant'. These popular outbreaks of democracy are often

unpredictable and come `out of the blue', making it hard for our poor managers to predict what we will accept and when we'll say basta! -- enough.

In Canada, we have had a regime -- like so many others -- of corporate giveaways and tax loopholes, but when our Government announced million-dollar grants so that professional hockey teams could meet the salary demands of the local ice gladiators, the shit quickly hit the proverbial fan. Within three days the Government was forced into an embarrassing climb-down. Unfortunately, lack of effective opposition meant that the hockey giveaway could not be used to lever open the issue of corporate giveaways in general. Several years earlier, the recalcitrant Canadian public had rejected a top-down proposal to renew the Constitution, even though almost the entire political class was unified behind it. On occasion, this popular reaction can sweep across whole continents, as the revulsion with genetically modified foods has swept across Europe, to the dismay of Monsanto et al.

Throughout history, from ancient Athens to the Italian city-states of the Renaissance to Rousseau's Geneva and the Paris Commune, urban life has been a crucible for democratic ideas and experiments. This remains true today. From Mexico City (where the power monopoly of the PRI has been broken) to London (where the Ken Livingstone campaign fights the whole party system), urban politics challenges the agenda of the political class. It is cities which tend to keep issues like homelessness and poverty in the public eye. Experiments such as the self-managed alternative community of Christiania in Copenhagen or the participatory budgets brought in by the Workers Party in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre (attendance in open-budget forums has soared from 3,000 to over 20,000) keep stirring the democratic pot. In the realm of creative democratic theory, it is thinkers like Murray Bookchin and Jane Jacobs who envisage an urban path to self-rule.

There is an old expression that `all democracy is local' and it shows in places like the Japanese seaport town of Maki, where they took the unheard-of action of using a local referendum to frustrate the plans of the National Nuclear Agency. It's a rarity in highly centralized Japan, but

local resistance to central power is common currency from Thailand to Catalonia -- indeed, in many places it is the main way politics is expressed. The `selfishness' ordinary people display in not wanting a shiny new dam or superhighway is deplored by the managers of state politics. But ordinary people have an annoying habit of believing that they are the ones who should get to decide.

The grand-design theorists who would revitalize democracy by refashioning it, should keep as many decisions as possible in the local arena, where face-to-face politics are still a possibility. After all, ordinary people run hundreds of thousands of democratic organizations -- everything from service clubs to women's centres to housing co-ops -- from Atlanta to Abidjan. And despite the misgivings of theorists like Thomas Hobbes or Max Weber about people's ability to self-govern, they do it quite well, thank you very much.

In an era when anti-political hostility is being used against democracy, in demands to roll back the public domain in favour of a highly unequal and hence undemocratic market, the only real alternative is to `democratize democracy'. Any redesign has to be a mix of direct forms of democratic expression with popularly controlled representative institutions. The arsenal of redesign ideas is large and varied: more referenda; citizen juries with real input on policy issues (often referred to as `deliberative democracy'); limits on terms and campaign finance; systems of proportional representation that allow for a wider expression of views in the parliaments and assemblies; recall provision for politicians who break their word. While it may not now be entirely possible to `compose the music of the future' (a lot of trial and error will be involved), any design must allow maximum space for meaningful political input.

This is a long way from the consumerist approach to politics, where the occasional choice between Brand X and Brand Y is turning us into cheerful or disgruntled robots -- `idiots' in the original Greek sense of people `irresponsible because unconcerned with public affairs'. It makes us easy prey for the politics of scapegoating -- the currency of politicians with little else to offer who take advantage of the vast store of free-floating resentment that accompanies our powerlessness. Democracy is active,

consumerism inherently passive. Consumerism leads to unthinking reflexive choices -- `throw them out of the country', or `an eye-for-an-eye', with little thought for context or consequence.

As the Algerian activist, Nadia Leila Aissaoui put it: `If democracy is the right to speak out and be heard, as a voice and not just a number then I am a democrat. But if democracy is the freedom to choose between Coca-Cola and Pepsi, Levis and Nike, BBC or CNN, McDonald's and Pizza Hut, then ... I don't want to be a democrat.' Democracy depends on the notion of active citizenship and engagement -- the very thing the political class and the journalists, spin-doctors and opinion-managers who serve it find messy and threatening.

Of course, a perfect democracy is probably not possible. Democracy is, in a sense, a constant horizon we must strive to reach. Undemocratic concentrations of power will always form and need dissolving. Cliques and cabals will need challenging. Civil-service empires will need to be deconstructed. The economy today exerts a constant pull that is used to `discipline' democracy with what is `realistic', to keep some in poverty and others in villas, BMWs and stock options. Even if the essential element of democracy is built into the economy, accumulations of privilege will continue to be an anti-democratic irritant. Replacing our passive consumerist democracy with a reinvigorated polity will provide us with a platform to fight for fairness and equal rights against the blinkered technocrats and market globalizers.

Democracy may always be unfinished business. But it is our business. Let's take it back.