

## The myth of modern democracy

**Far from being proof of our political emancipation, our right to vote in parliamentary elections is a symbol of power that keeps us powerless. By Ivo Mosley**

Although we assume that British democracy is modelled on the ancient Greek system, there are essential differences. The ancient Greeks did not vote for representatives. The 500-member governing council of Athens and most of the officials were chosen by lot, much as a jury is selected in modern Britain. The terms served were short: council members served for one year and could not serve more than two terms. Athens was small: the total number of citizens probably never reached 50,000. By the time they died, most citizens had held political office of some kind at least once.

The council coordinated the state and prepared proposals (changes in the law, declarations of war, and so forth) for the general assembly. Any citizen could attend the assembly, which met on roughly 40 days spaced throughout the year. Final decisions were taken there by votes cast directly on each proposal, after speeches for and against.

Classical historian Moses Finley defends ancient Greek politics against two camps of critics: elitists, for whom it was too democratic; and anti-elitists, for whom it was not democratic enough (because women and slaves did not have citizenship). For Finley, it was democracy of an extremely direct kind, one that has not been tried since.

Voting for representatives began with the Romans as a way of suppressing democracy. The common people were allowed, after much agitation, to elect people to represent their interests, but the candidates had to come from the ruling senatorial class and voting was weighted in favour of the rich. Thus an element of democracy was introduced, while true power remained within the ruling class.

Along with political representation came the kind of long-term political alliances that would later be recognised as political parties. The practical realities of electing representatives once every few years meant that voters had to vote for a whole raft of interests; in other words, for a political programme. Politicians were identified by which faction they belonged to, usually based on which class they promised to represent.

When democracy started making inroads into the European political scene more than 1,000 years later it imitated the Roman model, but with a significant difference. Voting itself was restricted by property and/or rank. In the UK the widening of the franchise in the 19th century eventually led to the formation of the Labour Party. It also had a class-based agenda: the redistribution of wealth. Now, more than a century later, we are left in an anomalous situation. The old ruling class has been disempowered, but our system of democracy was actually designed to keep power with a ruling class. As a result, a ruling class is continually created out of those who can work the system to their advantage. We live in an illusion of democracy.

There are periodic flurries of discussion about how we could improve democracy, but only recently have people begun to discuss whether it might be a good idea to incorporate an element of Greek democracy in our modern system. Would it be an improvement, for instance, if the House of Commons was chosen by lot, replacing professional 'lifer' politicians with ordinary people? This is the central suggestion in Keith Sutherlands new book *The Party's Over*.

The 'jury', Sutherland suggests, should be drawn from ordinary people with a minimum age qualification (he suggests 30). There could, of course, be other requirements - perhaps to undergo a basic course of study in political history, akin to taking a driving test. He suggests that the Upper House should consist of life peers chosen by Parliament for their experience, achievements or service, and that these 'Lords Advocate' be responsible for preparing and presenting business to the Commons, and for presenting opposing arguments. The administrative side of government (ministers and so forth) would be appointed by a bureaucracy attached nominally to the Crown but acting in accordance with the wishes of Parliament. Ministers could be removed, and policies reversed, by a simple vote of no confidence.

One can only speculate on whether such juries would approve the panoply of madnesses, great and small, that plagues the modern world. It may be the case that Western 'democracies' are too entrenched, psychologically and structurally, to change. We are used to thinking that our single vote once every few years is the one true sign that we live in a democracy. Without it, what power would we have? The irony is, the vote is a symbol of power that keeps us powerless. It is an illusion: it keeps us from looking at how we might really participate and determine our own destiny, rather than drift helplessly in the power of those most unscrupulous and unsavoury characters - politicians and chief executives. To adapt a phrase from Karl Marx, 'voting is the opium of the people'.

Ivy Moslem is the author of *Democracy, Fascism and the New World Order* (Imprint Academic, £8.95)

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