



2006 essay competition (18 and under category)

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“Does democracy need elections?”

The system of British democracy that has prevailed for centuries has been the election of representatives to the House of Commons and the formation of governments based on who can command an overall majority. This method, though remaining fundamentally the same, has undergone large alterations and reforms, notably Disraeli and Gladstone's reforms which gave millions of working men the vote and Lloyd George's introduction of women's suffrage, after a long resistance to it. Yet despite the reforms that have gradually occurred, many today hold the belief that the Westminster system is outdated and redundant. One need only look at voting turnout figures to see that people are increasingly reluctant to take part in traditional politics. Only 58% of eligible voters participated in the 2001 general election (the lowest figures since 1918) and for the 2004 elections to the European Parliament (important as the only directly elected body in the EU) turnout was a mere 38% in the UK.

Yet this is not necessarily apathy, there is a growing number of people who feel very strongly about many political issues but may well not vote on Election Day. This is especially prevalent among the youngest voter age groups, turnout among 18-24 year olds, for example, is notoriously low yet the majority of people this age have passionate political views. Going to a ballot station and crossing a piece of paper seems an alien concept to many of all ages. Yet many more see no reason to vote because they view the system as ineffective, undemocratic or unrepresentative. I will discuss the accuracy of this view later, but whether or not there is much truth in it, it is a fact that disaffection with the Westminster system is growing. People are looking for, and finding, alternatives. We saw this on a massive scale during 2005 and the *Make Poverty History* campaign. Millions of ordinary people (many of whom, I believe, would not or could not vote in a General Election) campaigned through writing, demonstrating and proudly sporting wrist bands for the ideals of the campaign. Also, in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq conflict millions of people fiercely opposed it made their voices heard. The noteworthy connection between these two events is that many people who would not consider themselves 'political' or interested in politics and may well not vote at most or any elections began to take part in campaigning on a specific issue.

The question facing us, as a society and individually is: is taking part in these campaigns an acceptable alternative to voting in elections? In my opinion the answer is no, the reason being that we cannot assume the campaigns are indicative of public opinion simply because they are widely covered. With both *Make Poverty History* and the anti-Iraq war campaign (but particularly the former) whenever these were discussed in the press or on television there were clear overtones that the campaign in question was doing the right thing and arguing for good etc. In many cases, therefore, a culture develops in which anyone who openly disagrees with a particular campaign looks negative or even close to heartless. This inevitably leads to people supporting the campaign either because they do not want to look pessimistic or heartless or because they have been swayed to the campaign due to the lack of open opposition. Identifying supporting specific issues as an acceptable alternative to voting in official elections will simply mean the UK becomes a bandwagon democracy in which decisions are made based on who can 'shout the loudest' and get the most positive publicity. This is when it becomes clear that elections are necessary as they retain a key factor: the *secret* ballot. In order to support a single issue outside of elections one often must publicly discuss and campaign for the issue, at least if you want others to support the same. But many or most people will not feel comfortable publicising their personal opinions. In a secret ballot a voter can select any candidate on the ballot paper and no-one knows the voter's choice unless they choose to tell others. Furthermore, although campaigns often receive indisputable widespread support we can never assume they are representative of the opinions of the whole of society. For example, the organisers of the largest London march against the Iraq conflict claimed two million people attended [source: BBC news online, Sunday 16th February 2003, "**Million** march against Iraq war"]. Even if this statistic is true, we must remember that this means fifty-eight million people *did not* march against the war. It would be ludicrous for a government to assume that a majority of the population oppose something because they know two million do.

I have established that protesting on single issues is not an acceptable alternative to voting in official elections in a democratic society like the UK. But we must look at the reason a substantial portion of the electorate decide not to vote in elections. As I have said, it is by no means all apathy: our democratic system has some deep flaws that are deterring people from voting. How can the government expect the electorate to carry on voting if when they *do* vote their decisions are not implemented? It is hardly surprising that people are turned off voting when the electoral system means power won is not proportionate to the votes cast. In the 2005 General Election the Labour party won 35% of the votes yet they won 55% of the seats. Equally significant is the 1997 General Election in which Labour won 43% of the vote and 63% of the seats; yet the share of the vote was *less* than when they *lost* the General Election in 1970. If people are expected to vote the least that should happen is that their opinions are respected. There are so many viable alternatives to First Past the Post which are routinely rejected by governments with increasingly flimsy arguments. We

are caught in an endless circle, governments are elected under an unrepresentative system and therefore do not want to change it which means they are elected again, and so on.

A different electoral system would not simply bring people back to the ballot stations; there are key constitutional reasons why a more representative system should be implemented. In a modern, free democracy it is essential that there is no higher power than the electorate. In the UK, there is a higher power: the system. There are very few other countries in the world with democratic systems comparable to ours, and there is a reason for this. Unlike the UK, most nations in the western world have experienced a radical change in their society be it a revolution or large change in national boundaries. After this, they have installed new systems which on the whole are democratic and representative. We have grown used to systems such as First Past the Post and undemocratic institutions such as the unelected House of Lords. This may be the reason the UK does not have such a system but it is *not* an excuse, tradition should never be more important than democracy and to this end we must be bold in making reforms we see fit to make our system of governance truly democratic.

Nothing can or will replace the UK's representative democracy, nor should anything replace voting for individuals (though there is no reason why these should not be participated in, in *addition* to voting). It is because of this that our democratic system should be fair and represent what the electorate want. I sincerely believe we should defend the parts of our democracy that have served us for centuries but only if they are suitable and fair for the present and for the future; certain parts are but so many are not. It would be foolish to 'put up with them' for any longer, so why do we do so? There is a strong resistance to radical change which has prevented anything from happening in this respect. Perhaps it is time for this to give way in favour of true democracy.