



2006 Essay Competition (Over 18s category)

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“Does democracy need elections?”

"Democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself.
There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide."
-- John Adams, 2nd American President

"It is plain that the vaster the social unit, the less possible is true democracy."
-- Alasdair Gray, *Lanark*.

"The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation
with the average voter."
-- Winston Churchill

Kremer's Theorem posits that the IQ of a committee can be accurately calculated by dividing the average IQ of its members by the total number of members that comprise it. Assuming that elected members of the House of Commons have a slightly higher than average IQ (say 125, compared to an overall average of 100), then by this formula, the combined IQ of that legislative body is 0.19. Furthermore, if we accept the premise that a society is essentially a very large committee, then the UK electorate, the committee which chose the individuals who sit in the House of Commons, has an IQ of 1.7×10^{-6} . Whilst the former body appears to be better intellectually equipped to make decisions about governance, the fact that they were elected by the second perhaps renders this irrelevant.

There is nothing natural about the modern liberal democracy. There is no particular reason to expect democracy to work, and there is no real long-term precedent of it having done so, particularly on the scale necessary today. Democratic states built on the European model arose a matter of centuries ago, whilst human societies have been waxing and waning for thousands of years. Prior even to this, archaeological evidence strongly suggests that our ancestors lived in nomadic groups which rarely numbered more than a couple of hundred individuals, and that this would have been the case for the vast bulk of human prehistory.

There should be no assumption that such groups were entirely peaceful communes living in a utopian paradise, in which all decisions were carried out by an enlightened committee which somehow managed to reach educated decisions. It may well have been the case that a few dominant individuals took responsibility for collective actions, and that these would have been responded to by either faithful adherence or violent usurpation, depending on their outcomes. What matters is that whether you regard the leaders or the group as a whole as ultimately responsible for decision-making, in such a situation there is one central element that makes all the difference: Proximity. Proximity allows information to flow efficiently between individuals, and for a group to respond effectively to the challenges it faces. Collectives which number thousands or even millions of individuals, face difficulties because the group members are not in regular contact with to one another, or with the reality of their problems. Whereas in small social networks it is possible for individual members to keep track of every other member in the group with which they are cooperating, us larger ones rely on bureaucracy, written rules and the mass media to keep the flow of information, and to keep people accountable for their actions.

The question of exactly how this is best accomplished has preoccupied thinkers in the industrialised world for most of its existence. Economists and philosophers have suggested various frameworks which might allow large societies to work fairly and efficiently, and the main differences between these frameworks have more often than not been due to musings on the innate behavioural tendencies of humans, or the lack of them. It has been speculated that we are most suited to solitary individualism much like most animal species, or in contrast, that we are entirely capable of self-sacrifice for the collective good in much the same manner as colonial insects. Adherence, in varying degrees, to either standpoint has defined the political landscape in much of this part of the world, and the terms 'left' and 'right' are now widely taken for granted as being those that are most useful in describing a person's political philosophy.

One thing that is quite clear about human analytical processes is that we like to classify things. We group people, objects, ideas, places into categories that most enable us to understand their characteristics. So what happens now that our political landscape has changed so much that the classification system we used to rely on has become obsolete? Before New Labour, it was clear where the two main parties lay. The Liberal Democrats were a bit harder to pin down, but the two-party system made them irrelevant anyway (a point I will return to). Now Labour occupy what is regarded as the centre ground on a lot of issues, and on some significant matters lean conspicuously to the right. Recently, the Conservatives have moved to the centre to the point where they too overlap with the opposition's traditional territory, and now none of the three parties are very hard to distinguish apart in terms of broad philosophy. It almost makes more sense to name them after their respective symbols or colours, since their names are now almost entirely anachronistic, and perhaps misleading.

The idealistic struggle of the left and the right is no longer of any consequence to politics in a society which has seen the benefits of harnessing self-interest for economic growth and dynamism and of looking after the collective needs of society by regulation, as well as the negative consequence of fostering one approach at the expense of another. We are animals, but we're social animals. This is the accepted view in mainstream politics, as anyone familiar with the recent posturing of the red, yellow or blue parties will show.

Our democracy, as it currently stands, is not suited to such consensus. The lines dividing the two main parties have been blurred and crossed. It is ideas, not ideologies, which now battle it out, and the collections they form are often not in any way coherent enough to make any one mainstream party particularly suited to any one individual's set of beliefs. Populism, mediocrity and fashion dictate the policies of the day. The combination of the collapse of the prevailing political paradigm and the constraining two party system has sucked all the vitality out of UK politics, and it will take a constitutional revolution to make democracy work again. We used to have two choices, but now we only have one.

We were so used to the old system working, that it was not necessary to question it. The 'left or right' question was so big, so important, that two parties were enough. Now, people's concerns are much more diverse, and there are issues, such as the environment and ecological sustainability, which a significant number of people regard as of paramount importance, but which the main parties never really appear to take seriously, because they're too busy pandering to a growing number of floating, apathetic voters with no real choice and thus no real engagement. The average voter is like a hen forced to declare a preference for two unattractive and uninspiring roosters. The two party system dilutes people's views, both by the small number of mainstream parties that it allows in parliament, and by the system which involves elections being decided on the basis of crude averages of constituency-level elections.

There is no reason to assume democracy should work, but there is every reason to try to identify its problems and engineer it so that it works for us, fostering valuable debate and a tangible connection between politicians and the electorate. The single most effective way to do this is to implement an electoral system, such as the AV+ system, which will engage the public with the political process, by accurately representing the views of every single voter at a national level. Of course, some level of constituency politics is important because it gives people representation on local issues. However, the benefits of geographical proximity to and some one-to-one contact with an MP are ultimately a diversion, because the important decisions which affect the electorate are made in Westminster. The other most commonly used argument against proportional representation, that it necessitates formation of ineffective coalitions and political stalemates is no longer relevant under the current circumstances of muddled party lines and loyalties (consider the reliance of our Government, which has a comfortable majority, on the opposition's support for both the Iraq war and the recent education reforms). Such electoral reform would also serve to increase the coherence of party politics. The rise of real choice and the decline of compromise will allow

smaller parties to gain momentum and refine their ideas, whereas the mainstream parties would be forced to be less populist and form policies of substance.

Electoral reform will give us genuine accountability, increased voter turnout, engagement with the issues that are genuinely important, productive debate, and political parties which can be distinguished from one another according to meaningful criteria. The dichotomy which defined politics in the 20th century is a dodo. There is no reason to expect democracy to work, but what choice do we have, but to try?