Democracy in Theory and Practice

I. The meaning of the term 'democracy'

The Ancient Greeks were the first people to develop democratic ideas, Athenian democracy being practised in a small city-state or *polis*. Pericles observed that: 'Our constitution is named a democracy, because it is in the hands not of the few but of the many'. This is the essence of any democracy. The word is based on two Greek terms, *demos kratos*, which literally mean 'people power', or 'rule by the people'. In the city-state, it was possible for allcitizens to come together and make decisions, a state of direct democracy. Debate was free, open and wide-ranging, each citizen having a single vote. Until the nineteenth century, democracy was generally viewed in terms of some form of **direct** government through majority rule, an idea little changed since the time of the ancient philosophers.

In more advanced and more complex industrial states, sheer numbers made the direct and continuous participation of citizens in government impossible. Face-to-face popular rule, with the mass of people coming together to make decisions, could not work. A new form of democracy replaced the Athenian variety, known as indirect or **representative democracy**. This involved freely elected representatives of the people making decisions subject to popular control. In effect, the few govern on behalf of the many, so that democracy as it now operates is actually a form of oligarchy or elitism. What is crucial is that there should be effective popular control over the rulers or decision-makers. A system is democratic to the extent that those who have power are subject to the wishes of the electorate. The majority of people are vote-casters every few years at election time, but in between have little say.

II. The criteria of a Western democratic system

Key elements of a modern democracy include the following:

• **Popular control of policy makers:** This involves the right of choosing the policy makers at a general election. The voter has the right to vote in periodic elections, and in the lifetime of a government the opposition parties perform the role of criticising its policy and seeing that the rights of the individual are respected. Government must be subject to control by the governed, and this control is exercised through elected representatives. The existence of opposition, by individual MPs and parties is a litmus test; without a right to oppose, there can be no democracy.

• **Political equality:** Every adult must have the right to vote, each person having only one vote. In the words of the nineteenth-century radical Jeremy Bentham, 'each to count for one, and none for more than one'.

• **Political freedoms:** There must be a free choice, without coercion of the voters, at a secret ballot. If voting is to be effective, it must be free in the sense that opposition candidates can come forward. In other words, there must be a meaningful choice of candidates. There must also be rights to free speech, assembly, organisation, etc., and the existence and extent of such liberties as free expression is a crucial test for any would-be democracy.

Majority rule: The right of the majority to have their way may seem just, but it needs to be accompanied by toleration of any minority, its views being recognised and respected.

- **Liberal democracy**

Britain and the United States, along with the democracies of Western Europe, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, are often described as **liberal democracies**. This means that they are representative systems which also embody the concepts of diversity, choice and individual rights and freedoms, as opposed to collective equality or mass participation. Liberal democracies are noted for their adherence to the ideas of:

• Pluralism: the existence of diverse centres of economic and political power;

• Limited government: checks and constraints on the power of government;

• Open government: non-secretive government which can be seen to be fair and accountable;

• Independent judiciary: a just, impartial legal system.

III. Britain and the United States

By the criteria in the section above, Britain and the USA do both qualify as liberal democratic states. Indeed, some would go further and say that they qualify as the foremost democratic states, so that Hacker felt inspired to describe them as 'the world's two leading democracies'.The Founding Fathers favoured a representative democracy in which the people govern indirectly by electing key individuals such as the President, members of Congress, governors, mayors, state legislators and others, to make decisions on their behalf. As we have seen, in such a democracy, the people do not normally vote on or directly make specific policy decisions – they do so indirectly, through those they elect to represent their interests. The word 'democracy' is not used in the US Constitution and, although the opening sentence of the document refers to 'We the people', the people its framers had in mind certainly did not include the whole adult population. The Fathers preferred the term **republic** to describe the form of government they wished to create. 'Republic' lacked the connection with direct democracy, with its undesirable overtones of mass rule, demagogues and the mob. As Hague and Harrop explain, the American Constitution 'contained the seeds of democracy, but it placed government under law before government of all the people'. Because Madison and his colleagues were concerned about the danger of an undue concentration of power in too few hands, they established a system based on the Separation of Powers, including a series of in-built checks and balances. They favoured limited government to stop any individual or group from using its power to damage the interests of other people. They disliked the idea of excessive governmental power, which could be a threat to individual freedom. They wanted to protect not just minorities but also the population as a whole from arbitrary or unjust rule. Today, the American idea of democracy is a belief in government where authority is based on consent and the will of the majority. If asked 'who should govern?', most Americans would respond 'the people'. The notion of 'popular sovereignty', that authority flows from the ruled to the rulers, is well established.

Many Americans have a dislike for and distrust of government, a classical republican fear of tyrannical rule. Sceptical of politicians, they have been increasingly attracted to the idea of deciding issues for themselves. A modern form of direct democracy is well established in many states, in the form of initiatives, referendums and the recall. In New England, with its surviving town meetings, it is more similar to the Athenian approach, with people meeting together to make decisions for themselves. Along with representative government, the idea of 'limited government' is basic to the idea of liberal democracy. If the Americans give much weight to preventing the abuse of power, the British have placed greater emphasis on the representative element.

In Britain, there are no such formal restraints on the power of government – a codified constitution, a bill of rights and a separation of powers – and the winning party in an election is able to act in a way which Hailsham described as an 'elective dictatorship'. For the British, the concept of democracy has traditionally been about ensuring that, following the contest of parties in free elections, a group of politicians are elected to get on with the job of governing. If they fail to act in a way the electorate likes, they can be ejected at the next election. The idea of party competition is more deeply ingrained in the British system than in the American one. As in America, what Hague and Harrop call 'the battle of principle' for democracy was won in the nineteenth century, but 'the implementation of democratic procedures' continued well into the twentieth. Women did not get the vote in either country until after World War One, and in Britain neither did six million men.

In America, not until the 1960s did African-Americans so benefit. In Britain, reform of the House of Lords to trim its powers did not get underway until 1911, and the process of democratisation of the chamber is still unresolved today. The removal of the bulk of the

hereditary element has been accomplished, but election of a segment of the membership has yet to be introduced. The Americans opted for direct election of their upper house via the passage of the 17th Amendment (1913) and also took steps to involve more people in the process of choosing candidates by the adoption of primary election contests. There been no significant British interest in direct democracy until the last three decades, although from time to time the idea of a referendum had been floated. The first national referendum took place in 1975 and there have been others since, in parts of the United Kingdom. Whenever they have been discussed, whether for the Euro, the use of proportional representation at Westminster or the re-introduction of the death penalty, the counter-argument has usually been made forcefully – that Britain has a representative democracy in which those in power, who have had a chance to research or listen to the arguments, make often-complex decisions on our behalf. Supporters of a participatory democracy argue that much more should be done to increase public input into policy decisions through procedures such as initiatives and referendums. Others believe that too much public input through direct participation can be damaging. In America, many local school districts have faced budgetary crises in recent years because local voters have constantly turned down requests to increase revenues. In Britain too, in some local referendums the voters have rejected Council Tax increases and better or maintained services.

IV. The health of democracy on both sides of the Atlantic

Traditional features of the democratic way of life have long existed in both countries, including:

• ample opportunities for the free expression of opinions;
• elections by secret ballot from a choice of candidates;
• government resting on consent and being accountable to the people;
• opportunities for people to influence government;
• a spirit of tolerance prevailing between the majority and the minority;
• a reluctance to coerce recalcitrant minorities, and via free elections the means by which a legitimate and peaceful minority may seek to transform itself into a majority; power may change hands peacefully.

Both countries have long been regarded as model democracies. But democracy is more than observance of a particular form of government, based on the existence of free institutions. It is an ideal, something to aspire to. In other words, although the framework may exist, it needs to be maintained in a constant state of good repair, for otherwise erosions of the democratic structure can easily creep in and undermine the whole. Anxieties about the state of democracy have been expressed in recent years. Some commentators on either side of the Atlantic believe that today the democratic system is not working as well as it should. In 1999, Kenneth Dolbeare wrote of ‘the decay of American democracy’ and asked whether the condition was a terminal one.12 He saw the problem as one compounded by the sheer scale and power of the government in Washington, for this has meant that it is ‘increasingly connected only to a steadily shrinking proportion of its affluent citizens’.

Dolbeare discerned several factors which contributed to the ‘decay’:

- The decline of political parties;
- The rise of television;
- The dominance of money as a means of access to television and electioneering in general;
- The rise of Political Action Committees;
- Near-permanent incumbency in Congress;
- A general abandonment of leadership to the latest opinion poll.

More seriously than any of the above factors, however, he sees the ‘thirty-year trend toward abandoning political participation’ as the most alarming indication of decay. In particular, this

means a continuous decline in voter participation (a point well illustrated by recent presidential elections), a particular problem concerning those in the bottom one-third of the social pyramid.

Similar criticisms have surfaced in Britain too. Critics point to such things as the exceptional secrecy of British government, the election of strong governments which lack majority support among the electorate, the relative weakness of Parliament, the lack of opportunities for minorities and independents to gain recognition, and failings in the areas of civil liberties. In the early–mid-1990s, some commentators pointed to the poor British record in the European Court, in a series of cases concerning the failure of Britain to protect basic rights. Others noted the continuing failure to introduce an electoral system which more adequately reflected the way people voted in general elections and the lack of freedom of information legislation, among a number of other things.

V. The blemishes on democracy in the two countries

As in other democracies there are blemishes within the system in Britain and the USA. To take a few specific points:

Lack of knowledge, interest and belief in politicians on the part of the electorate: Many voters are ill-informed about political issues, or indeed any other issues affecting public affairs. In both countries, there is a significant element of the population which forms an under-class, uninformed about, uninterested in and alienated from the political system. There is widespread scepticism about politicians and what they promise and deliver, and those who are alienated feel that politics has nothing to offer them. It seems irrelevant to their lives. This group is concentrated among the least well-off. There exist dramatic contrasts in lifestyles among the American and British peoples, with a significant element at the bottom in what Will Hutton calls a '40:30:30' society. Trust in government has declined, with fewer people thinking that politicians can be regarded as truthful, reliable and willing to act in the public interest.

Low levels of political participation and of turnout in elections: If democracy thrives on popular involvement and participation, the number of people who are actively involved in the political process is very small. In Britain, there are only occasional referendums, few voters join political parties and even when there is a chance to register a vote an increasing number do not bother. In the USA, turnouts are again very low by European standards, and even since 'motor voting' the 1996 and 2000 elections have revealed that many Americans are disinclined to vote.

The electoral system: First Past The Post may usually provide a clear winner, but some would suggest that the grossly disproportionate power given to the two major parties (Conservative and Labour, Republican and Democrat) at the expense of small ones is not only unfair but undemocratic. In both cases, government does not rest on majority support. Under the FPTP system, there are no prizes for coming second. Unless a party wins, it gets no reward for the votes it receives. FPTP encourages the belief that a vote for third or minor parties is a 'wasted' one

The media: In both countries, there is a free press, relative to that of former communist countries and present dictatorships. But the trends towards concentration of ownership means that there is insufficient diversity of viewpoint. Discussion of policy often gives way to an infatuation with personalities. Marketable sound-bites are often a substitute for rational argument and elections are all about photo opportunites and pseudo-events.
Successful politicians in the media age invariably talk in entertainment-orientated themes. This can make political philosophy seem fluid.

Rights have been neglected: Britain lacks a written constitution and a formal Bill of Rights, although the situation has now been partially corrected by the passage of the Human Rights

Act, incorporating the European Convention. But citizens do not have an upto-date, clear, tailor-made statement of the rights we might claim. In the USA, basic freedoms are set out in the Bill of Rights. The idea of equality was proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence's resounding cry: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal'; this is often seen as an American contribution to mankind. Certainly, privilege and rank count for less in America than in Western Europe, and an egalitarian fervour is in a way a part of the American dream – that each person can go out and make a fortune, by using his or her gifts and exhibiting a pioneering spirit. But the position of African-Americans until comparatively recently suggested that in practice not everyone benefited from the Jeffersonian dream. Whatever the constitutional theory, it was a long time before African-Americans achieved their due recognition.

Money has become too important in politics: Money has become a controversial factor in British politics in recent years, with constant press stories dogging New Labour in office. From the Ecclestone Affair onwards, a series of issues have arisen which point to a conflict of interest. Legislation on party finance has been enacted to place a ceiling on the amount any party can spend during an election campaign and to make donations more transparent, but greater openness has only highlighted the 'generosity' of wealthy backers whose motives may not be disinterested. Large gifts from multi-millionaires continue to offer problems as well as support for the parties and their images. America has had curbs on the level of individual contributions since the 1970s, but money continues to be a cause of great unease. Money is an all-important campaign prerequisite. Without it, candidates cannot get elected to public office, because they need television to help them advance their campaign and viewing time must be purchased. Many people assume that those who provide funding want something in return and whether the money comes in the form of soft or hard money, it causes unease. Some candidates dislike having to plead for campaign contributions, but know that without it their efforts will stall. Electoral success should not be determined on the basis of wealth. It is unfair that richer parties or candidates can use their affluence to buy a greater chance of success. But on both sides of the Atlantic there is a feeling that an undue emphasis on money damages the fabric of democracy.

VI. Some key differences

Decentralisation: government beyond the centre: In recent years, a measure of decentralisation of government has been introduced via devolution, thus bringing government closer to the people, a belated recognition of the Gladstonian principle set out more than a hundred years ago that 'keeping government local makes it more congenial'. But, devolved power is always subject to supervision by the sovereign body (Westminster) and can in theory be revoked by it. By contrast, in a federal state power is constitutionally divided between the central government and the provincial or state government. In the United States, federalism was instituted to increase democracy and it does strengthen democratic government in many ways. It was designed to allay the fears of those who believed that a powerful and distant central government would tyrannise the states and limit their voice in government. It provides more levels of government and consequently more opportunities for participation in politics. It gives citizens easier access to government and therefore helps keep it responsive to the people.

Open government and freedom of information: Secrecy is then a key element of British government and it is reinforced by a range of bureaucratic, constitutional, cultural, historical and military factors. The recent British legislation on freedom of information started to be effective from 2005. It has been widely criticised for its timidity, even though significant concessions were extracted from ministers during its passage in 1999–2000. On the principle of openness and the right of access to information, the US performance still leaves Britain trailing. America has had a freedom of information act since 1966, as well as a series of laws

and rules (the ‘sunshine’ acts) which opened up the vast majority of congressional meetings to public view.

The use of direct democracy: The use of methods of direct consultation with the people – such as the referendum, the initiative and the recall – are practical demonstrations of direct democracy in action in the United States. More unusual and distinctly American is the use of the town meeting in small rural areas of New England.

Conclusion

A political democracy exists when:

• The people have a right to choose and dismiss their government in free elections;

• They are faced with a choice of candidates from more than one party and those parties are allowed to place their views before the electorate without impediment;

• All concerned in the process of government subscribe to the values which make democracy work.

In Britain and the United States, there exist institutions which can regulate the clashes of interest that inevitably arise in any pluralistic society. Both countries can be described as examples of liberal democracies. There are other types of democracy, countries which are ‘semi-democracies’ perhaps on the road to the more complete form, or ‘façade democracies’ which have some features recognized in the West as democratic, notably the existence of a government chosen via popular election.

Democracy is widely seen as the ideal form of government, which is why the leaders of so many nations are keen to describe their governing arrangements as ‘democratic’. It is a model to which many aspire, but in practice many democratic countries have some blemishes on their records. The workings of both British and American democracy have been subjected to searching criticism in recent years and in some respects found deficient. But the overwhelming majority of people on either side of the Atlantic favour the self-government and freedom that the system allows over any alternative, even if the outcome is imperfect.