

## **Public Democracy**

By: Geoff Bell

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It seems strange to proudly boast that we in Britain 'live in a democracy' when the ability for the public to influence government policy is so tenuous.

Policy is created by political parties, who if elected, will put that policy, and others not necessarily declared prior to the election, into practice. The political parties themselves are created by groups of people with similar interests and goals.

Historically, as civilisation developed, power was held first by the King or clan leader (or in the absence of a male heir, a Queen and his/her Noblemen (to an extent) and he/she dictated policy. His interests were primarily the protection of himself and his family and of course his possessions, his Kingdom and his wealth. As time went by and with clear abuses of the public majority, public revolt led to more devolved power which was in turn passed onto the parliamentary democratic system.

Greed is sadly never far away from mankind and politicians. Initially the wealthy took on the mantle of politicians as the role was not paid and the poor could not afford to stand for parliament. They took on the mantle vacated by royalty and used the opportunity to set policy for their advantage. Bribery was rife; individuals accumulated many votes and used systems such as rotten boroughs to benefit those in power.

Not everyone had the vote initially. One man one vote was prised partially from parliament in 1884. Women did not get the vote until 1918 and only then by the use of mass demonstrations. Eighteen year olds did not get the vote until 1969 and again this had to be fought for. Even now, amongst the most liberal of parties, we still see comments such as 'let's remain in control' (the political parties on the subject of policy formation).

The Labour Party rose to prominence in the early 1900's to represent the manual and professional workforce in the UK. It was backed by the Unions which provided financial backing to fund election campaigns. As with most groups, even for this section of the community, unless you were an active member of a Union, your views may not be taken into consideration but your membership of a Union provided the Union with power in the form of the block vote. This has been watered down a little with subsequent legislation.

The Liberal Democrats have for many years tried to get support for Proportional Representation in the form of the transferable vote system. Both Labour and the Conservatives have ganged up to rubbish PR stating that it leads to weak government. They have had to take this action and make this stance as to do nothing cedes power away from their parties and ultimately their financial backers.

It is import however to separate out the method of electing your MP from that of the creation of government policy. They are not one and the same thing. PR is therefore simply not a substitute for the public having a direct influence of what policies are created and then put into effect. It is also important to dispel the myth that the only way for the public to have a say in policy formation is that they would need to vote on every single issue however trivial. For example should cat owners be forced to fit collars with bells on to their pets? That argument is a smoke screen just as much as the arguments set against PR.

To explain the approach further I put forward as one example of best practice methods used by industry to obtain information about what the public thinks of its services on offer and indeed just how effective they can be. Successful companies rely very much on market research to find out what the customers think of their services, products and their features. For example, Whitbread and the Premier Inn brand. The opinion of customers helps form the type and specification of products and what services and features companies offer. Of course, if they did not, customers could go elsewhere.

The problem with politics is that there is little choice. All too often, it is only after a party is elected, do the public find out the real agenda. If they don't like it, which tends to be mostly the case, they have to wait for 5 years to express their disapproval or the country suffers public protests in order to get the government to change its stance. This is s very disruptive way to progress and hardly an example of good practice in a 'democratic' society. It leads to frequent policy reversals following change of government/party, policy direction lacks consistency and economic progress for the country as a whole suffers.

There is also a genuine feeling amongst the public that politicians will say anything to get their way. For example in the current debate over the in/out EU referendum; neither side is willing to mention the negatives of being in or out that relate to their position. But of course there are negatives for both options. This just does not show politicians in an unbiased light; they are not impartial and tend to rely upon fear and bullying as a means of getting their own way. This management style just has not changed for centuries within the sphere of politics.

The recently released change of stance by George Osborne over student fees; against them when in opposition but reverses his opinion in power and triples the amount that students are charged. No wonder that the public have such a poor opinion of politicians. Another case is that of the changes of pay and condition for junior doctors. This was being forced through by Jeremy Hunt against the overwhelming rejection by the whole of the body of the junior doctors. Eventually Hunt had to back off due to public opinion and the damage his changes were doing to the relationship between the highly educated professionals, the doctors I mean not the politicians, the government and the health service. Hunt's stance was just too dictatorial and none inclusive.

History has shown repeatedly that an inclusive management style is far more effective in the long term than a dictatorial stance. For those of you, who enjoy reading history, compare if you will the styles of Horatio Nelson and William Bligh.

Nelson's was very much inclusive. He sought out the opinion of those under his command and included them in the decision making process. He cared for the crews under his command and he had one of the best records for their health and well being in his time. This was a highly successful approach and he established a great following amongst seafarers who actively sought to work under his command. Not only that, his tactics were incredibly successful and he achieved great successes with somewhat limited resources.

William Bligh's style by contrast was somewhat confrontational and verbally abusive. Not surprisingly he failed to establish the same level of rapport with his crew and he never rose to achieve the success that Nelson did.

My definition of a Public Democracy is that in which the views of the public are taken into consideration and consensus sought in policy creation and adoption; possibly by the use of market research and other feedback techniques. It would also open up the whole of the policy creation input process to the community at large. Politicians generally stick to their own internal policy generation processes and ignore objections to them even when it can be clearly demonstrated that they are not achieving their stated goals. This implies that either the politicians are incredibly stupid or their publically stated goals are not the ones that they are pursuing. Take your pick. Inclusive policy formation allows for parties to seek out the best options. Additionally the public may petition the government to address any particular concerns that they have over specific issues which they feel need to be addressed

### **Safe Guards.**

Clearly there needs to be safe guards in such a process. Small groups could be penalised and they need to be protected. For example, homosexuals were persecuted for hundreds of years. Why? Because the majority of society did not understand that the gay community were just 'wired' differently from the majority and they tried to force them to change. But gay members of society did no harm to the rest of the community so why should they have been so poorly treated? The injustice and suffering caused was horrendous. This must never be allowed to happen again and provision needs to be made for it. The same can be said for other minority groups so long as they do not harm the rest of the community.

Fiscal Prudence. Clearly only sensible financial policies that do not lead to Britain bankrupting itself should be considered. But I would suggest that the majority of the public are sensible enough to accept that limitation.

Defence and security. There are areas where specialists are required such as the armed forces and national security. Yes they need to be publically accountable but also empowered to carry out the tasks that society asks of them. We saw in the 1930's the build up of arms by the Nazis. Britain and the rest of Europe were slow to respond and one by one the Nazis picked off various EU states. Britain ignored the calls to re arm and stand up to Hitler by Winston Churchill. We were wrong footed. Since that time we have had peace in Europe and I suggest that this has been in part due to the nuclear deterrent, NATO and a genuine desire by the older war weary states of Europe not to allow us to slip back into the bad old ways. Jeremy Corbin has stated that he would like to see the nuclear deterrent scrapped. As the British public have to live with the consequences, this must never be allowed to happen without the public having a say in that decision. Ultimately our lives depend upon the right decision being made.

As Churchill stated, the government is the servant of the people, not their master. We are not there yet but we could be. So why should the Lib Dems consider such an approach? I suggest that it would give the public a chance to ensure that government really is the servant not the master in the relationship. I cannot see either the Labour Party or the Conservative masters allowing such a system due to their vested interests. But the Lib Dems have less baggage; it would give us a clear advantage and might I suggest that once tried, the public would not wish to go back to the old ways.

I promised to limit this article to fewer than 2000 words which I have done. The above I hope it is understood is only a very rough outline of the definition as I perceive it of Public Democracy. Clearly far more flesh needs to be put on the bones of this animal.

But from my limited enquiries on the subject amongst none political members of the community, there does seem to be significant interest in the concept. Surely this is worth exploring further and our own market research carried out to find out how this would be received by the public at large. But if we do nothing and continue as before nothing will change. ***'If you always do what you've always done, you will always get what you've always got.'*** Is that what we want? Do we want another 110 years of political wilderness? Maybe for some there is safety in that.

*Geoff Bell*