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Civic Virtue in Australian Democracy

Joshua Crowther

Western liberal thinkers and politicians note with pride democracy's expansion across much of the globe. They prize their democratic political theory as the most judicious, ethical and creative of all the forms of government. In their policies and pronouncements they attempt to further this process in the name of the greater freedom of the human race. However, is this captivating vision of democracy as the victor in the tumultuous history of ideological conflict and the balm of tyranny's wounds — a facade?

The attempts of liberal democracy to expand rapidly beyond its historical origins in Western societies are weakened by the reality that it no longer enjoys its hallowed place in the public imagination. In almost all Western liberal nations, disillusion is seeping through the electorate. Australian democracy, Henry Parkes' 'crimson thread of kinship',[1] is not immune to these trends and must consequently address them before it can claim to be a proponent of democratic expansion on the global stage. Parkes' thread referred to the civic duty of all citizens, united by common birth and national heritage, to perform service for the state in the name of common purpose and survival. This concept resonates with the origins of the Western idea of democracy, for the initial Athenian experiment defined democracy, in Benjamin Constant's words, as the 'sharing of social power'[2] by the male citizens, while modern representative democracy erects an intervening institutional layer or layers

between the electors and the operation of power. Despite the latter's emphasis on the preservation of personal liberties, this division of the nature and purpose of political life from the rest of society has caused many to question not only the relevance of politics, but also the significance of active citizenship, which is the foundation upon which any true democracy ultimately rests. There is no visible belief in the common interest, only in the concerns of individuals. The subsequent decline in political engagement by ordinary electors has given rise to a vicious cycle of partisanship, political correctness and populism, all of which further erode democratic ethics. In order to regain these values, this cycle must be analysed, checked and reversed, and by doing so we might attempt to regain the spirit of Parkes' vision.

It is in the nature of democracy that individuals are obligated to examine the manner in which they interact with the wider community, with the nation, and with the world as a whole. The citizen must always have regard to the needs of society and be concerned about his or her role and influence in the broader social and political context, since the actions and perceptions that originate from this ideal of service to the wider community can be regarded as essential to the concept of civic virtue and hence of creative democracy. The citizenry is an organic structure and requires the participation of citizens in the political process in order to function effectively as a political and democratic body. The philosophy of a political system is both deeply intertwined with and reflective of the ethics of the society in whose confines it functions. However, there remain distinctions between societal issues and the fluctuations of the political arena. The problems that currently plague modern Western liberal nations in the guise of rampant individualism and consumerism arose for the most part from economic origins, separate and distinct from the influence of the political process. Politics adapt according to the evolution of society, but it cannot easily dictate cultural trends. The characteristics of society are therefore much broader and more difficult to analyse than the precise figures used to calculate political participation in a narrow sense, such as party memberships and voter turn-outs. Despite this, the adverse effects such socio-economic factors

have had over political activity, even within such a restricted definition of democratic politics, are indicative of the wider consequences of their prevalence in modern society.

It is clear that individualism has over recent times steadily become a more dominant concept within the public mind of democratic societies. Disillusion and apathy are widespread, and even the most basic forms of participation in democratic government appears to be in terminal decline. Electoral turnouts in countries where voting is voluntary are plunging. In the 2001 British general election nearly 26 million people voted, while more than 32 million votes were cast in the first season of *Pop Idol*.[3] This is the outcome of a gradual decline in electoral participation which has been prevalent throughout the postwar era. In 1950, 84% of registered British voters turned out, and yet the 25.9 million voters, just under 60% of the electorate, who voted in the 2001 election constituted the worst turnout since 1918.[4] This decline in turnout is derived in particular from the growing lack of interest in democratic politics among the young. This phenomenon was decisive in the 2000 US Presidential election, where the 29% of voters aged 18 to 24 contrasted with the overall turnout of 55%.[5] The experience of the 2008 Presidential election might at first seem to contradict this perspective. Barack Obama placed great emphasis throughout his campaign on mobilising those members of the electorate who had abstained from voting previously. However, this is an anomaly. Obama's success was based upon his strategy of utilising grassroots activists in order to maximise turnout and voter participation. These attributes do mirror many of the tactics that all political groups should aspire to adopt. As a result of his charisma and profile, he was able to appeal to the large parts of the electorate dissatisfied with the political status quo. However, experiences such as this in liberal democracies are often counter-productive. On those occasions where governments have been elected on a wave of optimism and idealism, such as the election of the Blair government in Britain in 1997, they have tended to disappoint the electorate, thus increasing cynicism and disaffection. Australia is one of the few democracies to have introduced compulsory voting. This practice

insures against many of the electoral weaknesses which voluntary systems are obliged to confront. Turnout is consistently high, there exists a semblance of political equality, and elected representatives can claim more legitimacy, having been elected by the majority of registered voters rather than merely by those who chose to participate, than their equivalents in voluntary electoral systems.[6] However, aspects of the policy remain flawed. Many voters engage in 'informal voting', where they chose the order of the preferences on their ballot paper at random, rather than according to personal beliefs. This demeans not only the individual ballot, but the votes of those who do appreciate the importance of their ballots, and thus the entire democratic ideal. Compulsory voting does nothing to address the causes of disaffection. Although it ensures constant participation in the very specific political process of federal elections, it does nothing to address the wider reasons for the loss of politics' relevance in the public mind. Signs of voters' lack of interest can be found in low turn-outs for voluntary elections, particularly local polls.[7] The decline in political activity among the public cannot be simply be resolved through policies which concentrate upon a narrow and limited form of democratic participation.

The act of voting itself remains the most passive expression of opinion in a democratic society, for as Paul Ginsborg notes most electors will dedicate an average of 72 minutes of their lives to the act of voting.[8] Thus to treat it as the sole manner for individual involvement in democratic government is to ignore the essence of the problem which mass disaffection poses. Moreover, compulsory voting approaches the dilemma from the wrong direction. The issue could be tackled more effectively if the causes of disaffection with democratic institutions were examined, rather than adopting government regulation as the solution to all woes. In Democracy in America, de Tocqueville noted that:

> If men in democratic countries had no right and no inclination to associate for political purposes, their independence would be in great jeopardy, but they might long preserve their wealth and their cultiva-

> tion: whereas if they never acquired the habit of forming associations in ordinary life, civilization itself would be endangered.[9]

The decay of the foundations of modern liberal democracy cannot be dismissed as a purely political conundrum, to be resolved through regulation and party politics. It is a reflection of the evolution of Western capitalist society and must be analysed and resolved within a social paradigm rather than restricted to the remote and conflicted theatre of high politics. Modern life, despite all its material benefits, has completely undermined any sense of common obligation and responsibility. The contemporary citizen is encouraged to perceive the acquisition of material goods as the most efficient method of achieving self-satisfaction and, supposedly, happiness. The quality of one's life is now seen as contingent upon the value of one's assets and purchasing power. It is not difficult to see how such attitudes fail to foster any sense of shared duties and communal responsibility. Plato, noting the effect of such acquisitive instincts in democratic Athens, observed that 'love of money and adequate self-discipline in its citizens are two things that can't coexist in any society'.[10] This consumer culture encourages its participants to assess every enterprise and motive in terms of its financial value and never according to moral obligation. Work is reduced to an expression of individual self-interest rather than the scheme through which society itself might progress.

The uneven distribution of economic capital throughout Western liberal society is not the fitting foundation for the democratic ethic. In this system, where the accumulation of capital and the satisfaction of desires overawe mutual trust and responsibility, those who profit from the system 'call shame silliness and drive it into disgrace and exile; they call self-control cowardice and expel it with abuse; and they call on a lot of useless desires to help them banish economy and moderation, which they maintain are mere provincial parsimony'.[11] Therefore, it is unsurprising that work without profit is an anathema to modern liberal society. This ascendency of greed, combined with the emphasis given to financial capital rather

than social capital, has created circumstances in which individuals shun the community and withdraw into private abodes adorned with the joys of their own internal existence. What results from this is not a society, but rather a gaggle of consumers, united only in their competition with each other. To reverse this trend, civic-minded individuals cannot simply restrict their activities to dialogues with elected representatives: they must examine the nature of their own personal ethics. Keynes postulated that if the accumulation of wealth ceased to be regarded of high social importance:

> We shall be able to rid ourselves of many of the pseudo-moral principles which have hag-ridden us for two hundred years, by which we have exalted some of the most distasteful of human qualities into the position of the highest virtues.[12]

The evaluation of the ethics of a society allows the most appropriate assessment of that society's health. By agreeing to such an evaluation the citizens must in turn reform the morals upon which they justify their own behaviour. Only through such introspection can voters accept that the interests of the entire society are always of greater importance than those of individuals.

The fragmentation of common kinship and the regression towards individualist attitudes has been further exacerbated by the emergence of fractious and counterproductive divisions founded on narrow interests, stripping the democratic ideal of the free and non-partisan dialogues that it requires. The various clashes between political partisans and democratic activists has caused citizens and politicians of all persuasions rashly to classify and stigmatise one another as 'left' and 'right', 'liberal' and 'conservative'. The Australian experience of the 'culture wars' is one manifestation of this self-imposed system. Political partisans, by their very nature, believe fervently that their interests, perceptions and objectives are those of the nation at large. Indeed, without the organization and passion espoused by these activists, many of the reforms and issues currently occupying the attentions of the nation would not have been pressed into the public domain. For instance, without the efforts of the Green movement, it is doubtful whether such substantial debate and

progress could have been made in the decisions and initiatives to respond to the threat of climate change. Again, the recent industrial relations controversy could not have occurred in the absence of activism by Liberal politicians, in particular members of the H.R. Nicholls Society. It is always the objectives of such movements to persuade and convert general public opinion to their perspective. Consequently, rather than being the fountainhead of democratic initiatives, public opinion is constantly reacting to campaigns and publicity.

The party system is, like society at large, founded upon the principle of competition and, as is logical, political parties attend to their own concerns and constituencies. This institutionalized schism of the representative democratic system between competing wings has the capacity to subvert national unity and hasten the rise of individualism, for as Machiavelli noted, 'when together all are strong, but when each begins to consider the danger he is in, they become cowardly and weak'.[13] In the struggle to acquire votes there emerge intransigent conflicts between those who would tie the party to its original ideological purpose and those willing to compromise their ideology in order to garner votes. This conflict, caused by the pragmatic considerations of a competitive party system, not only causes recriminations and fragmentation, it also calls into question the philosophical justification of political parties. The 'Left' in particular has been confronted by this paradox. In order to prevent chasms widening between the intelligentsia and the working voters, who are often so alienated from the mechanisms of their party that they vote against their own economic interests (as exemplified by the 'Howard battlers' in Australia and the 'Reagan Democrats' in the United States), leftist political parties have been obliged to abandon their socialist roots and move towards the centre. The legacy of their pragmatic decision is philosophical barrenness. The party no longer stands for or serves any ideal except self-preservation. Thus the public is confronted by a catalogue of self-interested organisations concerned only with the contest for power and, for the most part, without any clearly defined ideological vision. The resultant dearth of profound debate and conversation over the future

of the nation inevitably succours the widespread disillusion already apparent in liberal democracies, and party membership is now in freefall. In European democracies in the 1960s 15% of the electorate were members of a political party. By the beginning of the 21st century, this had declined to 5%.[14]

Political parties of course do not possess a monopoly over democratic expression. The postwar era has seen many of the greatest examples of the democratic spirit ever witnessed in modern, Western societies. These political movements are entirely separate from and independent of political parties. They are founded upon the freedoms of speech and association, and are comprised of citizens united by a common purpose. The successes of the women's movement, the environmental movement, and the civil rights campaigns are examples of what every citizen should aspire to contribute to his or her community. Indeed, many of the greatest triumphs of democracy have originated from outside party political activities. This active, forthright political behaviour by citizens is much more preferable than the idiosyncrasies of party politics and the continued expansion of their activities and membership is to the benefit of all society. The rise of these popular movements has coincided with the decline in the membership of political parties. Certainly many citizens have transferred their support away from political parties that they feel no longer represent them, to social movements with whom they share a common ideology. However, this alone cannot explain the dilemma facing liberal democratic society. Disaffection is still widespread throughout Western society, despite the existence of these movements. The falling turn-out for elections is indicative of this, for if participation in community activism was expanding throughout the populace, greater involvement in the electoral process would reflect the increasing sense of political obligation and interest. Social movements should always be encouraged, however, for their ability to give ordinary citizens an effective political voice provides the best method with which to reverse the cynicism and sense of disinterest common in Western liberal democracies. However, although these movements are of vast importance

to the functioning of democracy, they are not yet strong enough to either destroy political parties or supplant them.

To despair of political activism is, however, to condemn the system to the vicious cycle in which it now finds itself, for 'when by ill chance the populace has no confidence in anyone at all … it spells ruin, and necessarily so'.[15] Political parties have achieved many great accomplishments, and a place always exists for them in the functioning of liberal democratic societies. However, they must be accountable to the public rather than their own ambitions. All citizens must endeavour to ignore the inherent self-interest which characterises the relations between the party and its electors, and vote according to their consciences rather than their financial interest. Moreover the public must attempt to discover its own voice, independent of centralized political parties. Through social movements and political activism the citizenry can express their own opinions, as did their Athenian forebears, without the translation of their representative. 'A house divided against itself cannot stand'[16] noted President Abraham Lincoln, and if the citizenry allow distrust and cynicism to erode their sense of unity and shared purpose, then the nation is indeed in jeopardy.

The internal complexities of political parties aside, democracy remains in principle the rule of the people, and as long as the people possess the ability, however limited, to effect change through the vote, they retain a modicum of power. Therefore, if the conclusion is reached that active and effective democratic participation is in decline, then the voters cannot escape some responsibility. One of the great paradoxes of democracy is that those who take such pride in the power that they have received, delight equally in ceding responsibility for maintaining it to their leaders. Democratic electorates constantly seek inspirational leaders upon whom they might place all their extravagant hopes, expecting the newly-elected government to solve all their woes. The most recent example of this phenomenon was the historic election of President Barack Obama in the United States, yet the history of the messianic leader reaches much farther back than November 2008.

Rousseau was the first to argue that power should be vested in an inspired or inspirational leader who would become the personification of the body politic. This is a deeply dangerous concept, not simply because it persuades the citizenry to suspend their critical faculties and accept unquestioningly the will of government, but because it is at heart unethical. Any leader who allows the populace to conclude that he or she is indeed a perfect messiah is engaging in an act of deliberate deception, while the public surrenders to this belief because they above all wish to shift responsibility for the often difficult solutions to the nation's predicaments over to a separate authority. Indeed democracy 'doesn't mind what the habits and background of its politicians are; provided they profess themselves the people's friends, they are duly honoured'.[17] This shift in turn exonerates the citizenry of having to restrict the freedom of its own activities. The challenge presented by climate change has bestowed an opportunity for the citizenry of liberal democracies to alter the dynamic by which they live their lives. Instead, politicians are constantly obliged to assert that the policies conducted against climate change shall have no adverse financial or behavioural impacts on households in the new market of emissions trading, as if the health of the environment can be banished beyond the homes of the public. This denial is the contribution that the citizenry makes to the rising tide of populism sweeping through liberal democracies. Therefore, to blame the cynicism of political parties for the prevalence of populist measures in modern liberal democracies is to ignore the fact that the populace is too willing to believe such policies. This habit of accepting simplistic and misleading truths, rather than pursuing difficult policies, which often contradict individualist concepts, has long been seen by philosophers as the fatal flaw in democracy. Plato and his contemporaries even regarded dictatorial rule by philosopher kings as preferable to what they saw as mob rule. It is necessary, in order to counteract these authoritarian ideas, for citizens not only to question the practicability and morality of all government initiatives, but also to temper their own expectations, for no individual or section of society can solve the difficulties

confronting all members of the public. The success of society as a whole cannot depend simply upon the casting of votes every parliamentary term, especially if those votes are cast in order to further purely individual interests and aspirations. Only when electors choose what is ethical rather than what is self-interested will we truly have the last dance of populist politics.

These recent reversals and tribulations are not worthy of the political profession. It has a long and admirable history, populated by men and women willing to undergo the acute attention of public scrutiny and the sceptical questioning of motives in order to achieve what they believe to be the greater good for their constituents and for society as a whole. It has never been entirely free of corruption, but neither has much else in the awkward path of human existence. The decline of politics in recent times is neither natural nor inevitable, nor is it the consequence of history. The blame for the decay of Western political institutions is shared both by those who oversee the system and those whom they claim to represent. Politicians have allowed party mechanisms to gain pre-eminence over democratic institutions, and by doing so have caused disastrous confusion in the public mind between the interests of discrete sections of society and those of society as a whole. This process, however, would not have been possible without the deliberate withdrawal of the citizenry from democratic politics and into the realm of private interest. This in turn has changed government from being the instrument of the people to being their barrier, an institution intended to minimise the influence of external factors on private life — and it is in this state that Australian democracy finds itself today. Governments are, however, increasingly conscious of the weaknesses undermining the electoral system. Indeed they have begun to grasp the effect that their own policies, as well as more general social trends, have had in alienating the practice of democratic politics from the democratic ideal in the public mind. The Democratic Audit of Australia has concluded that while the public continue to venerate the concept of democracy, they are deeply disillusioned with Australia's democratic institutions in their current form. As Scott Brenton noted, 'there is strong evidence support-

ing (Pippa) Norris' contention that citizens support democratic ideals while being critical of the practical workings of democracy'.[18] Citizens therefore do not question the importance of democracy, but due to the nature of both the political system and contemporary Western society, feel disenfranchised and without a stake in representative government. There have been many initiatives attempting to reverse this perception through the reformation of aspects of the electoral process. In February 2008, the Democratic Audit of Australia published its electoral reform agenda,[19] which recommended a sequence of reforms to the Australian electoral system. Many, such as amendments to postal voting, party registration, donations and the introduction of fixed terms, possess the ability to increase voter interest and restrict the excesses of political parties to a limited extent. However, the essential problems inherent in Australian representative democracy are much more extensive than the reach of parliamentary reforms, and require deep reflection over the entire apparatus of Australian democracy and its aspirations.

The negative aspects of political partisanship and populism have caused the tightly woven fabric of democracy to tear and fray. The solution to the predicament which modern liberal democracy currently finds itself lies outside the conventional institutions of representative democracy. Indeed Australian citizens should seek to incorporate a form of 'deliberative democracy' into the nation's political life. The structure of Australian government, incorporating several tiers separating the ordinary citizen from the machinery of politics, must allow individual communities the opportunity to influence the daily course of politics within their neighborhoods. This is the principle of the civil society, which can best be defined as 'an immediate area of associationism distinct from the private sphere, the economy and the state'.[20] It is a forum for free and open debate located within every democratic locality and founded, both ethically and legally, upon the principle of freedom of association. This practice, allowing all citizens the opportunity to express themselves in front of their assembled community, in relation to any issue of significance, liberates citizens from their complete dependence upon elected represen-

tatives while further improving the quality of political discourse in the nation as a whole. Moreover by granting local people the power to influence the political agenda in their local community, local government allows those who will be most affected by change in policy to have an opportunity to influence its development. This 'deliberative' interpretation of democracy is not intended to undermine its representative equivalent or its institutions, merely to provide the electorate with a constant stake in the making and reforming of policy. The 2020 Summit identified these difficulties and its recommendations provide a blueprint for possible solutions. Realising the need for citizens to 'participate in an engaged, modern democracy',[21] the Summit proposed a number of suitable forums for deliberative democracy to take place, including citizens' juries, citizens' parliaments, and participatory budgeting. Moreover, through the imposition of a Charter of Free Speech and reform of the freedom of information system, the Summit hoped that government would be made more accountable and accessible to the electorate. Improved accountability in particular would help to restore the trust between voters and government, which is so critical in a democratic system. Australians must take heed of these recommendations, for they provide the most logical path to the renewal of the democratic spirit in Australian society.

Australian society is favoured with many of the attributes of a healthy pluralistic society. Freedom of speech and association guarantee the circumstances in which vigorous and free political debate can endure. It is within the structure of these liberties that many of the great modern political movements have been conceived. However, if citizens passively rely upon external institutions, such as the press and political movements, to express reservations concerning national policy on their behalf, then attempts to cure the ailments now undermining Australian democracy will remain permanently limited. To prevent this, voters, especially the young, must not transfer their democratic voice to others. Activism, participation in the function of local government and contributions towards public affairs publications are all meaningful ways for citizens to contribute towards the foundation of an improved social and

political system. The responsibility for improving the quality of democratic processes remains with every individual who enjoys the benefits of this nation's laws. The idea that anyone other than ourselves will achieve reform must be banished from our minds. President John F. Kennedy once said 'ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country'.[22] The time has come for all of us to ask this question of ourselves.

Endnotes

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Joshua Crowther is a previous winner of a Future Leaders Writing Prize. He is currently studying Arts at The University of Melbourne.