

Double Clicking on Democracy

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When did Democracy don the mantle of morality? For how much longer can we keep up the pretence that democracy is a stepping-stone to a global social utopia. When will it be seen for what it really is: a body count of the manipulated mob, to be abused by any determined control-freak?

Iceland's government sold the medical records of its population to private company deCODE Genetics. The UK population are forced to register names and addresses on the Electoral Roll. The Roll is exempt from the Data Protection Act, and is sold to whoever will pay. Burglars cross reference likely targets against directories on Compact Disks, and then phone to check their victims are out before breaking and entering.

A democratic vote is an excellent way to justify trampling on individual privacy. Prime Minister Tony Blair wanted every Police Force to follow the example of the Lothian and Borders Police, who are archiving DNA data from everyone arrested. Apparently seventy five percent of their local population support this action. But did the people of Edinburgh realise that a motoring office would place them in the database? Ninety two percent of the citizens of the London Borough of Newham want CCTV cameras to watch over their town centre. Newham is at the forefront of new technology. It uses face-recognition software. The movement of individuals can now be tracked around the Borough. The odd few percent that want anonymity will just have to shop elsewhere. Plato claimed that democracy always leads to despotism and tyranny. Big Brother turns out to be the manipulated voice of the tyrannical masses insisting on a state-led invasion of privacy.

What do we get in return for abandoning our privacy? An insignificant input into an inconsequential national election of a nanny-state, every four or five years, that has little or no influence on the general scheme of things. But do we care? The BBC extended its nine o'clock news bulletin by twenty minutes to report the 1997 General Election. Its normal viewing figures of 5.5 million dropped to less than 4 million. The cost of administering the same election on the remote Atlantic islands of St. Kilda would have cost the 29 adults living there a total of five thousand pounds. They decided not to bother and save the money.

Meanwhile, pious words abound concerning 'extending democracy' in an 'Information Society'. The United States administration has placed more than 100,000 documents on the Internet. However, a snowstorm of selected information from Washington (or Brussels, or Westminster) changes nothing. True, cable, telephone and the Internet will enable the public to receive far more relevant and in-depth explanations of political issues. But will they participate more intelligently in the political process?

Far from allowing voters into the policy and decision making process, technology actually spreads *Demosclerosis* (Jonathan Rauch), a disease of government. Mass lobbying of the by vested interests causes stalemates on every issue, forces through economically insane proposals, thereby driving government to its knees. On 5 November 1996, voters in California approved Proposition 218. All property-related assessments, fees, and charges have to be approved (but more likely disapproved) by the vote of property owners. Consequently

Moody's lowered the ratings on the various bonds of the City of Los Angeles, completing a self-fulfilling prophecy that the City would lose tens of millions of dollars in revenue.

The old cosy relationship between lobbyists and politicians, riding the gravy train of public money, is coming off the rails. So should individuals be worried about the rabble-rousers in government? Now any self-appointed control-freak can mobilize the masses to fax-blitz elected representatives, or carpet bomb them with e-mail. Anyone with deep pockets can manipulate the bigoted moral majority, and call for support on single-issue campaigns. They will disseminate blacklists of names of those who dare stand out against them. The exposed politician has become a 'rabbit caught in the headlights', needing to 'please all of the people, all of the time', on every single issue, or face their wrath come re-election time. Adding to the paranoia are advertisements, opinion polls, talk-radio spots, and mass phone calls funnelled through toll-free numbers. Astronomical sums of money will be needed for mass propaganda. In a democracy, like everywhere else, money talks.

Self-serving politicians will promise a wish-list of 'jam today and jam tomorrow'. The hell of a collectivist heaven will poll the opinions of the herd to reinstate capital punishment, to ban homosexuality and immigration, and to insist on a fair(?) distribution of wealth by stealing from the few rich. However, "a democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of government. It can only exist until a majority of voters discover that they can vote themselves largesse out of the public treasury" (Alexander Tytler). Today, that largesse is free welfare and medical payouts, and other social security safety nets. But no society can vote itself into an economic utopia. The invisible hands of untamed economic forces are at play. Individuals, companies, countries can only steer within the limits allowed by the flow of self-organizing trends of the global economy. Going against the flow is futile. If a society doesn't earn its wages then economic reality can be kept at bay only for a little while.

Ultimately, by insisting that society can pay itself unreasonable salary levels, or set excessive levels of taxation, either inflation or recession will return, and jobs will disappear. Nevertheless to get elected democratic governments will be forced to play this game. The needs of the masses will justify the invasion individual privacy to check that everyone is paying their fair(?) share. However, the rich, their wealth and their privacy will emigrate, as Christopher Lasch predicted in *The Revolt of the Elites*. In the Information Age, the 'politics of envy' is suicide. The big political question of the coming decades is how to find a socially acceptable means of dismantling democracy. No more 'one man (and more recently one woman), one vote'. The Boston Tea Party-goers insisted on 'no taxation without representation', so why not 'no representation without taxation', or even better 'the bigger the tax, the bigger the say'?

In a society that pays by credit card, prior to each election each voter is given an audited personal statement of the total tax paid. Then we vote for (credit that amount to) the party of our choice: the more tax we pay, the more votes we have. Naturally companies would vote with their corporation tax, and of course everyone with salaries paid for by the state would have no vote at all. It's still democracy, but not as we know it.