

Democracy is Hard



There has developed in this century a functional derangement of the relationship between the mass of the people and the government. The people have acquired power which they are incapable of exercising, and the government they elect have lost powers which they must recover if they are to govern. The unhappy truth is that the prevailing public opinion has been destructively wrong at the critical junctures... Mass opinion has acquired mounting power in this century. It has shown itself to be a dangerous master.

I wanted to start with this quote by Walter Lippman. It is a quote from the 19th century and basically says that democracy is a high ideal, but it does make governing almost impossible. Of course, governing has evolved as well to the point where voting has been manipulated to help governments govern, or one might say control, the public mob.

But let's do a little walk down memory lane. We'll start with the Greeks of Athens. Considered the birthplace of democracy, the men of the city would get together and govern, each "citizen" having one vote. Of course, women weren't citizens, so that's strike one. Also, you had to be rich. Being poor didn't count. That's strike two. The system worked fairly well as long as only a hundred or so men showed up to vote.

But even here, strong personalities dominated the debates. This form of democracy eventually evolved into more of an oligarchy as the strong personalities set the agenda. I'm sure intimidation was the order of the day. And there were no elections. Human nature tends people towards what's best for self.

Ancient Rome. Same thing. The Senate was full of the ruling families of the empire. Then Caesar came along with an army loyal to him. Army trumps Senate. Emperors were born.

So, for the next bunch of centuries, rulers governed with iron fists, backed up by their dedicated and loyal forces. Somewhere along the way, the Christian church started to ordain kings as chosen by God. This is where the divine right of kings comes from. Unfortunately, it also brought in hereditary rule and in a lot of cases, junior was not like dear old King Dad. The ensuing chaos led to wars,

slaughter, etc., but that divine right thing seemed to be ingrained into everyone's head. What the king said was law.

It was the merry old English that first tried to curtail the power of a king. The Magna Carta, that so-called freedom document, was really only freedom for the dukes and earls to do as they pleased without the king getting in their way so much. Great words on paper, but it was about one hundred years later before anyone really considered following the principles in it. The crown still remained the prize to fight wars over.

The Magna Carta also brought in the first English Parliament. It originally advised the king, keeping him from trying stuff no one wanted. Enter King Edward the First, who enforced royal privilege in governing the country. He ended up in wars with his barons but beat them all into submission. He then went on to do the same with the Scottish nobility. Sort of a step backwards here.

Enter Edward the Second, a poor example of kingship after his ever-dominating father. He was so bad that Edward the Third, who was more like his grandfather, had to go to war to regain what his father had lost. Through these years, parliament gained power by governing the country while the kings were occupied with wars. One of the things parliament eventually got was the power of taxation in 1362. By 1399, that led to the power to depose a king, albeit replacing him with just another of his relatives. That divine right thing was still supported by the church. Although it was barons, land owners and bishops that controlled parliament, it was the first real check on royal power. It still took centuries before universal suffrage (including for women) came to pass in the early 20th century.

The other dominant European democracy was France, starting with the French Revolution in 1789. Democracy was fleeting for France, having fallen back into dictatorship several times over the last two centuries. There's a reason today's French republic is known as the Fifth Republic. The first, formed out of the chaos of the French Revolution, relied too much on Napoleon for survival. Eventually, he didn't need it. With Napoleon's fall, Europe reinstated the Bourbon monarchy, who behaved themselves to a point until 1848 when all of Europe went out in revolution. The Second Republic was formed and short-lived once Napoleon the Third didn't need it anymore. When he was defeated by the Prussians in 1870, the Third Republic was ushered in. It looked like democracy was finally going to stick, although there were signs of instability in how government was structured in the country. Believe it or not, it was too democratic. Relating to a Scottish proverb of sorts, if you put two Scots in a room, you'll get an argument. Replace "Scots" with your favourite nationality or ethnic group and the proverb still applies.

In 1940, Hitler rolled in and it was back to rule by decree. After the war, the Fourth Republic was formed. Like the Third Republic, the Fourth had similar problems as the French turned out to be relatively ungovernable. They changed their governments 21 times over 12 years. So, enter the Fifth Republic in 1958, where Charles de Gaulle became president and strengthened the powers of that office. So far, it looks like that did the trick and a form of democracy has finally settled into France. It's still to be determined if the Fifth Republic can survive recent yellow vest protests and the rise of right-wing populism.

So yes. Democracy is hard. It is fragile. It is easily subdued by strong personalities, malevolent intent and thirst for power. Human nature works against it at almost every turn. Democracy is a hell of a

way to rule a people, but it's better than the alternatives. The only government type that everyone seems to agree might be better is a benevolent dictatorship, but that type of rule lives in the land of fairies and unicorns.

I will comment on American and Canadian democracies in a future blog where we'll look at the variation of representative governments, because true democracy is impossible when you have a population of millions.