

Is democracy an illusion? By Judith Stares

Well, I'm not a politician so I don't have ready answers, and don't need to canvass for votes. With no sense of irony I could say 'Trust me. I'm a journalist!' But, instead I would like to talk to you as fellow Europeans.

We in the UK are all Europeans now, and these facts affect the daily lives of us all and call into question the ideals we claim to live by.

In Western countries democracy infuses every aspect of life – we each live with the assumption that our views matter as much as anyone else's and that we should be free to express them. Most of us here have lived in a democracy all our lives, and believe we continue to do so. I'd like to examine some of that belief and ask you to reflect on some matters of fact.

First let us consider Greece – once known as the birthplace of democracy, Greece is now virtually a Protectorate of the European Union. A troika consisting of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund, now runs the country. In exchange for loans the Greeks are having laws imposed upon them. The troika can and does demand the privatisation of firms, for public officials to be sacked, and much more besides. All this in exchange for money, without which the country would go bankrupt.

Once the citizens of this proud nation gathered in the market place to discuss their government and its laws – now they gather to face tear gas. Greece no longer has control of her own destiny. Here, democracy has come home to die, and the people must just 'suck it up' as they say in the US.

Instead, saving the Euro has trumped democracy, which is only surviving by its fingertips in the rest of Europe. Portugal, Ireland and probably before long Spain and Italy are looking down the same road.

The second fact is that in Britain $\frac{3}{4}$ of the laws under which we live today are made in Brussels not the UK. National Parliaments in Europe do very little nowadays. The government you vote for, of whatever persuasion, is to a large extent powerless. The powers invested in Europe have increased over time, and the European Commission is now involved in issues like foreign affairs and immigration which were never part of its original agenda. From baby milk formula to working hours – all are the subject of European laws.

Just for the record, the European Union cannot declare war. This remains the sole exclusive right of a nation state. But nowadays the EU is involved in just about everything else.

To illustrate how this comes about I will give you a brief resume of the law making process in the European Union, because a lot of people are not fully aware of the precise composition and order of events. Bear with me and concentrate hard, because these facts are often little understood, but they explain a lot.

In Europe there are three main institutions: The first and most important is the European Commission – a type of Civil Service. This is composed of 28 commissioners – one from every nation state - they are unelected and unaccountable. Each commissioner serves a term of five years which can be extended almost indefinitely, and they are virtually unsackable. The commissioners are appointed by their country's government (the British Commissioner is currently Baroness Ashton, nominated by the Blair/Brown administration) But, and this is

an important but, on taking up office they sign an Oath of Independence, promising not to take or seek instructions from their national government. They no longer represent their country of origin, but are independent representatives in and for Europe.

The job of the European Commission is to propose new laws. They have what is called a Monopoly of Initiative, meaning they are the only body from which new laws can emanate.

The EC is also Guardian of the Treaties – they act like a policeman, making sure member states implement any laws accurately.

The second institution is the European Parliament. Unlike any other Parliament in the world, the European Parliament is not allowed to propose laws, but only to plead. There are 750 MEPs, elected to serve a 5 year term, and Margaret Thatcher in fact disparagingly called it an amending chamber – not a Parliament at all.

The third institution is the Council of Ministers. This is supposed to embody the will of member states. 28 ministers come together on various topics – it could be the environment ministers or finance ministers for instance. Qualified majority voting applies. There is a threshold of between approximately $2/3^{\text{rd}}$ and $3/4$ votes required before a law can be approved. Any country can be outvoted as no one country ever has a majority. There is no power of veto.

Laws proposed by the EC travel simultaneously to the E. Parliament and the Council of Ministers. The agreed final text becomes law. The whole system is set to favour approvals rather than rejections. Only a handful of laws have been rejected in the whole history of the European Union. Not unnaturally, the European Parliament consists of pro-European MEPs. They live and work together and are familiar with

negotiating the trade-offs required. Noone wants to rock the boat, despite the fact that laws can be passed which your country does not like.

Britain only has 78 of the 750 MEPs – which means it can always be outvoted. So although MEPs themselves can be deselected for whatever reason, it really doesn't make much difference. No one country ever has a majority position.

By participating in this process you give up your sovereignty for the collective good of Europe. David Cameron is hoping to reclaim some of these lost powers, but the common view is that his chances are virtually zero. It would set a dangerous precedent that others would surely seek to follow, and chaos would ensue.

We understand that democracy allows us to get rid of corrupt or inefficient leaders. In Europe it is virtually impossible to sack either a government body or an individual. The Commissioners are not like ambassadors who can be recalled. Remember they have signed the Oath of Independence. They no longer represent their nation state.

I ask you to consider: WHERE IS THE WILL OF THE PEOPLE EXPRESSED IN THIS MACHINE? WHO IS LISTENING?

The European Commission has no incentive to listen. They can carry on with their own agendas. There is a saying that 'people do not throw stones at their own building' – who does that building belong to in Europe?

Currently, most member states are in recession – some even in a depression. Unlike the US, Europe is focussed on austerity.

Democracy has been killed off in order to save the Euro, which is seen as the pet project of the political elite.

In 2006 a series of referendums was due to take place across Europe, on whether to accept the European Constitution proposed by the EC. In France the people said NO; the Dutch said NO. The remaining referendums were hurriedly cancelled because the President of the European Parliament feared that these two results would lead to 'contagion'! A statement more worthy of a dictator than a democrat.

SURELY A REFERENDUM, A BASIC TOOL OF DEMOCRACY, IS TO ASK WHAT THE PEOPLE THINK – NOT ASK THEM TO RUBBER STAMP A FOREGONE CONCLUSION?

It does seem that compared to the accepted definition of democracy the EU is undemocratic. The will of the people is ignored. It is not a government by the people for the people, but government by a political elite for a business elite.

Here is a final fact. According to the Democracy Index, published by The Economist Intelligence Unit, there has been a decline in democracy across the world since 2008. The analysis identifies two trends:

Increasing erosion of civil liberties and a steep decline in political participation.

Democracy as we know it has many selling points, including the recognition of a free press, and respect for a party of opposition. But the greatest selling point of all has been the fact that you have elections and can get rid of despots. Yet in Italy from 1945 to 1995 the same party was in power despite a so-called democratic system. It seems

that some democracies can ape dictatorships, as demonstrated by this stranglehold of the Italian Christian Democrat party.

In Egypt we are currently witnessing that if democracy fails to deliver the results you want then it is perfectly possible not to wait for elections, but to get rid of your leaders by other means.

Many eminent people have pronounced on democracy over the years. John has already used Winston Churchill's famous quote: 'Democracy is the worst form of government – except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.' I will offer you another bon mot from George Bernard Shaw: 'Democracy substitutes election by the incompetent many, for appointment by the corrupt few'.

What is certain is that democracy is a complex creature in today's increasingly technological world. It varies from country to country and depends on many factors, e.g. is there an educated electorate? Can they even read and write?

Today mainstream parties can use and manipulate the mass media to their advantage. Is perhaps enlightened despotism a more appropriate form of government under these circumstances? With China, an authoritarian regime, now looking to become a template for prosperity, is democracy really necessary?

The truth is, we do not know. The situation we face today is unprecedented – we face new challenges, including economic gridlock and perhaps catastrophic climate change.

Maybe we should consider that democracy is not a final solution but a work in progress. Living in a democracy does not guarantee a happy,

fulfilling existence. In fact, discontent and complaints are an essential element.

The case for democracy need not rest on the false assumption that the majority is always right, but the credible premise that it helps keep the few who rule in the service of the many.

One obvious conclusion from all this is tht we need to readjust our definition of democracy, and there must be new ways of working if democracies are to survive at all in a recognisable form.

People are cynical nowadays – politicians are distrusted and democracy is not what it used to be. Maybe that's a good thing. Where democratic institutions and practises are set in stone society ossifies.

Democracy is always under siege – it is up to us as individuals and members of a community to decide if it is worth fighting for.

Thank you

Judith Stares

August 2013