

## **Can Democracy Be Moral?**

The most fundamental principle of direct popular democracy is that even if the will of the people runs dead against a Member of Parliament's personal conscience, he or she must express that will.

Such logic compels us to ask: So why not just pick a rep out of the phone book? For that matter, why pick anyone? Why don't the people just send a letter to a vote-counting parliamentary computer by overnight courier? The answer leads straight to a conflict between two irreconcilable views of truth under democracy.

### *For A Leader, Truth Is Permanent*

Politicians who consider themselves leaders, rather than delegates, will take the classical conservative view, as outlined from ancients such as Plato to moderns such as T.S. Eliot. As distinct from their modern finger-in-the-wind counterparts, such conservatives believe that the greatest moral truths of life are absolute, permanent, and unchanging. There are enduring values that must be discovered through reflection and experience, and relied upon by wise leaders. Once discovered, and only then, the proper political and moral judgements can be made, unaffected by how many might vote this way, or that, on Monday or Tuesday. Moral truth, in other words, like  $2+2=4$ , cannot be altered by voting.

### *For a Delegate, Truth Is A Matter of Popularity*

The delegate, however, unlike the leader, sees him- or herself as empowered to express the will of the people, which is equated with what is desirable, with the good. Soon, pleasing the masses at every opportunity by removing all restraints on their will becomes the highest priority (and - not incidentally - the reaping of a corresponding popularity). Technical methods such as electronic town halls facilitate such direct expressions of mass desire.

The key to understanding the role of the modern secular-liberal delegate, is their underlying belief that there is no such thing as immutable truth - and probably should not be. For only if truth is relative can society be engineered toward perfection by way of continuously updated "progressive" policies. That is why, instead of weighing values, the liberal prefers to count heads. Unfortunately, this essentially democratic process - equating the good with sheer numbers - is the dark side of democracy, for it opens the door to democratic tyrants.

That's why Eliot said in 1934 that "the forces of deterioration are a large crawling mass, and the forces of development are half a dozen men." This was just before a large crawling mass of utopian collectivists marched over a darkened, and soon bloodied Europe. They had been directly and enthusiastically voted into power by well-educated, democratic majorities. Hitler

fiercely defended his national socialism as "the truest democracy" (Berlin, January 30, 1937), and described himself as an "arch-democrat."

What is the answer to this conflict at the heart of democracy, and why do we see so many with conservative, absolute-truth instincts, promoting liberal, relative-truth techniques?

Perhaps the answer is that we live in a time when our elected representatives, rather than attending to remote national matters such as defence, fiscal policy, and foreign affairs, are intruding into the most intimate and detailed aspects of local, private, business, and family and sexual life, and plundering the energies of the people through taxation and debt to do so. And that is why direct democracy - a kind of bottom-up revolution against a top-down political system - seems the only solution to rid us of such tyranny.

In most practical matters, such as taxation levels, this is likely a safe device. But when it comes to moral matters, such as euthanasia, abortion, capital punishment, homosexual incursions on the family, and so on, I rather think an elected representative has a duty first of all to make his own conscience known before he is elected. After that, he should vote with his conscience - or resign if he cannot do so. As for democracy itself, the notion that deeply moral choices ought to be shaped directly by the emotions of the moment - whether felt by one voter, or a million - is the route to self-destructive relativist world. That's why at such times, political power ends up dictating every outcome. The democratic dilemma will

That is because as often as not, the correct moral choices both in life and politics require us (quite contrary to the prevailing secular-liberal view), *to choose not for, but against our own appetites and desires in the interests of a higher good*. In other words, we should expect democratic citizens to be far more concerned for the next generation than for the next election, thus to vote for the higher ground even if this goes against their own personal interests. But there can be no higher good in a morally-relativist world. That is why this dilemma cannot be resolved until our civilization decides once again to think through these two conflicting notions of how democracy - of how the citizenry - is to be moral.

© William Gairdner