

DEMOCRACY OR DICTATORSHIP

“If liberty and equality, as is thought by some are chiefly to be in democracy, they will be best attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost.”

(Aristotle (384 – 332 BC). Greek critic, philosopher and zoologist)

According to the Concise Oxford dictionary and the Collins dictionary, democracy defines, among others, as, “a system of government or organization in which the citizens or members choose leaders or make other important decisions by voting”, or, “a form of society ignoring hereditary class distinctions and tolerating minority views”. The first definition intrigues me because I cannot, under that definition, think of any country, organization or company that actually functions in a democratic manner; and, the second definition is very important because, again, I do not know of any country in which hereditary class distinctions are ignored and few that actually tolerate minority views or opinions, rather, in some instances the views of minorities appear to carry much greater weight. But be that as it may.

Reading about the latest, and widely reported, spat between senior politicians I got to thinking how, in a supposed democracy, so much power tends to end up in the hands of one man instead of a collective cabinet, which is meant to be the democratic process that we are supposed to have in advanced, industrialised nations. In fact what appears to happen in most western, advanced, industrial nations is that people vote not necessarily for a local candidate but a candidate that represents the party that most closely aligns with their views on a number of issues; so, in effect they are voting for the leader of that particular party and so the system becomes a sort of dictatorship because the leader of a party is selected and approved by their representatives in their system of government. Is that really a democratic process?

This question can be applied to most if not all western democratic countries because the leaders of such countries are, more often than not, referred to as, for example, President or Prime Minister both of which indicate a ‘primus inter pares’ situation, which itself indicates distinction. And, worse, that distinction means that all decisions on major issues affecting the political, social and economic circumstances of a nation are actually under the control of one person, which again raises questions of major importance for the collective conscience of the electorate. As Mahatma Gandhi said,

“What difference does it make to the dead the orphans and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or the holy name of liberty or democracy?”

(Mahatma Gandhi (1869 – 1948), Indian ascetic and nationalist political leader)

Then I thought about the way in which most companies and organizations, even academic institutions and professional institutes, have Chairmen, Chief Executives or Managing Directors and Chancellors all of which, again, indicate a hierarchical system of control and management. Therefore, I have reached the conclusion that there can never be full democracy, as defined, in any shape or form, not even within religious institutions like the Catholic Church and the Papacy nor in monasteries and nunneries because individuals are selected, elected or appointed to positions of authority, usually by other people in even higher positions of authority, over all others within that group, section, society or nation.

The English Civil War, between 1642 and 1651, was fought between the forces of King Charles I and the forces of the Parliamentarians, because King Charles I decreed that, basically, it was up to him to decide how the country was to be governed and ruled, how the church should be established under the law under the divine right of Kings and it was not for subjects to question the royal prerogative. Matters were 'brought to a head' when King Charles I tried to arrest 5 members of Parliament because they would not accept his overreaching rule.

The Parliamentarians wanted to ensure a system whereby laws and decisions on political, social and economic policy were determined collectively and not by an individual executive system. Hence, after the defeat of the Royalist armies, Parliament was supposedly established as a representative body to take and make decisions collectively and not by one person through patronage and power. However, Oliver Cromwell was later encouraged to accept the position of Lord Protector of England and so the process came full circle and democracy was, ever so slightly, usurped.

Nonetheless, I contend that the democratic system is flawed for the simple reason that it is, more often than not, not just the capable but the determined, outspoken and aggressive members of a community, section, company or country who thrust themselves, in business and in politics, into positions of power, responsibility and presumably, but not always, accountability. And, that they often do this without any experience of managing a corner shop let alone a collection of people or a country. Therefore, it begs the questions just how democratic are democratic countries and how can the system of selection of senior businessmen and politicians be improved to ensure that the people who reach the top of organizations are the most capable and competent?

In fact I might go so far as to suggest that a full democratic system can never exist under any circumstances because organizing and taking democratic decisions on major issues affecting the group, section, division or society would be too cumbersome, at least for the time being, and would delay the process and, as we all know, there are many occasions when procrastination is the mother of decline. It might be possible, in the future, through electronic voting systems and secure identification to increase the level of democracy by introducing a system of consensus for the electorate to vote on major issues but for the time being we apparently have to 'lump it'.

That is because occasions arise when someone, somewhere and somehow has to take a decision on a major issue and he or she does that by themselves even after some form of collective discussion with advisors, specialists or supporters. However, for the time being we appear to have no better system, as Sir Winston Churchill suggested,

"No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

(Sir Winston Churchill (1974 – 1965), British Prime Minister. Hansard, November 1947)

Sir Winston Churchill, himself the son of an aristocrat, was a very capable leader of the United Kingdom during the Second World War and it has been suggested that his stubbornness or bulldog attitude was one of the reasons why the Allies defeated the Axis powers. However, not only was Churchill a politician but he had graduated from the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, he served as a war correspondent during the Boer Wars but he also gained experience, as a politician, as a member of the Liberal party as well as in a coalition party and the Conservative party.

However, despite his success and despite his personal ability, at the national election immediately after the Second World War Churchill and the Conservative party were defeated and replaced by a Labour government apparently because the electorate wanted a more democratic system of government and it proves, perhaps, that politicians can be made or broken depending on the major policy decisions they present to the electorate or take on their behalf. As President George W Bush reportedly said,

“The good thing about democracy, if people like the decisions you make, they let you stay. If they don’t, they’ll send me back to Crawford. Isn’t all that bad a deal, by the way.”

(President George W Bush. As reported in *The Right Man* by David Frum (2003)

But what has this to do with business you might ask. Well, all companies tend to be managed by one person assisted and supported by a group of senior managers, often referred to as a Board, who are, presumably, selected because of their general ability, background knowledge in a particular specialist area, for their general business experience or for another combination of factors and often personal contact.

However, how many times have you read that one particular person, the Chairman, Chief Executive, Managing Director or director of one company is also a member of the Board of another company or organization or has been selected, by a senior politician or politicians, to serve on the Committee or Board of a Quasi Non-Governmental Organization (QUANGO)? Are they the best person for the job, are they best qualified to provide advice, guidance and direction in that particular company or organization or, can it be that their connection, through club, institution or personal recommendation, is what actually got them the position? And, having obtained the position does it mean that they will necessarily make and take management decisions or provide leadership that is in the best interests of the company and the people who work in that organization or will it be based on other factors?

Even though the two areas are interrelated management is not leadership and leadership is not management. It is very possible, in many circumstances, to lead through charisma, strength of character and oratorical ability and, basically, decision-taking after specialist advice and support from other people. Good management requires greater knowledge and understanding of an organization, its culture, its products and services, suppliers and distributors in order to make best use of the resources and assets available. Leadership is the ability to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the people working with and for you in order to not only motivate them but also to deploy them to the greatest effect, in other words it demands experience at different levels before becoming a leader.

Where business leaders and politicians fail is in believing that they are both leaders and managers and sometimes their leadership ability or skill overlooks the need to understand people and know what motivates and encourages them to give off their best and whether they respond to a dictatorial style or inclusive style of management. There are occasions when an autocracy or benevolent dictatorship is, possibly, the best form of governance and leadership but, then again, I am reminded of the phrase by Lord Acton who suggested in 1887 that,

“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

(Lord Acton (1834 – 1902), British Historian and Professor.)

Which then raises further questions as to whether the optimum form of governance for any organization, company or country is a democratic system or whether a dictatorship is the one which best serves the purpose. Of course there are many instances where a strong, capable, committed and convincing leader is best suited to the circumstances but there are different types of leaders. And, thinking aloud, one has to look at the political map of the world now and in previous centuries and take a long, hard look at the attitude, actions and abilities of various political and military leaders to take an informed view.

It is reasonable to suggest, for example, that during his military career Julius Caesar was very successful and liked and respected by his soldiers and supporters but was he the same as a political leader? The Ides of March might not have happened had he not made enemies within the Senate and among other powerful men.

Again, it is reasonable to suggest that William the Conqueror was an able King and leader but how does that sit with the English people after he had defeated Harold at the Battle of Hastings and was he reasonable towards his Anglo-Saxon subjects? Apparently greed was his downfall and 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle' whilst giving a favourable view of William's 21-year reign also added that, "His anxiety for money is the only thing on which he can deservedly be blamed; he would say and do some things and indeed almost anything...where the hope of money allured him." Apparently some things do not change.

Admiral Lord Nelson is an undoubted successful leader and his many victories proved his leadership, seamanship and naval strategy skills but he was also well liked and respected by his officers and men.

The Duke of Wellington, the son of an aristocrat, was a successful military leader and his defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo set him up not only as a wealthy landowner but also into politics as the master-General of the Ordnance in a Conservative government in 1818. He proved, initially, to be a reasonable politician when he became Prime Minister in 1828 and approved such measures as Catholic emancipation, that is full political and civil liberties, to all Catholics in England and Ireland. However, he became increasingly unpopular because he was somewhat inflexible and undemocratic. For example, he would not introduce parliamentary reform to the House of Commons in 1830 believing that the existing system was the best available, and because of his attitude and comments on the Peterloo Massacre in Manchester in 1819 and because of his opposition to the Reform Act of 1832.

I am sure there are many other military and political leaders who were not successful and many who were undemocratic. But, what about powerful military and political dictators such as Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (Lenin), Josif Vissarionovich Dzhughashvili (Joseph Stalin), Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Mao Zedong, General Suharto and more recently Saddam Hussein.

Each of them is, allegedly, guilty of many acts of violence against their own people and against other nations and other peoples. They all came to power through political vacuums or weaknesses in their systems of political and economic management and because of corruption within their country; and, perhaps worse, they came to power and retained that power through the support and commitment of close allies and friends perhaps even other people in politics and business.

But surely none of them would have come to power without help and support, political, military or monetary from others who were like minded or believed that their policies and approach to governance was in their best interests; surely none of them could have achieved or seized power without hundreds and thousands of followers; and, surely none of them could have succeeded had their been a more democratic system of government with much more co-coordinated and concerted emphasis on achieving greater equality of political, social, economic and moral standards and issues?

Which begs the questions is democracy everything it is made out to be; does it really provide government of the people, by the people and for the people? Are there really democratic systems of government in place in all the supposed democratic countries because each has a different complex form of governance with ministers and ministries and each has an 'elected' few who make all the decisions on behalf of the majority. And, just how much freedom is there in a country that purports to be democratic and does that include complete freedom of assembly and speech? Or are there controls, regulations, laws and checks and balances that do not allow such freedoms? As the 18th century Franco-Swiss political philosopher suggested,

"As soon as any man says of the affairs of the state, "What does it matter to me?" the State may be given up for lost."

(Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778), Swiss-born French political philosopher)

Is that really democracy, and, more importantly should we not, instead, be pursuing the notion of liberty based on the premise that it is only when people are truly at liberty to do and say as they please that there is some possibility of an elected body being able to represent the interests of the people without hidden agendas and with a high degree of openness, integrity and commitment?

The question of how democracy works, the decision-making process of democratic governance and what makes a nation democratic and how it reacts and responds on the world stage has been questioned before. As Aldous Huxley wrote,

"A country which proposes to make use of modern war as an instrument of policy must possess a highly centralized all-powerful executive, hence the absurdity of talking about the defence of democracy by force of arms. A democracy which makes or effectively prepares for modern scientific war must necessarily cease to be democratic."

(Aldous Leonard Huxley (1894 – 1963) British born American Writer, Critic and novelist)

Democracy is meant to be open and honest but it has become, through greed, power, influence and corruption, much more complex. So, we are back again to the recognized and accepted definitions of democracy and how it can be introduced, managed, organized, nurtured and sustained so that the system is seen to be fair to every person within that company, organization or country and how, as a democratic nation, foreign affairs should be conducted. As Alexander Hamilton stated,

"It has been observed that a pure democracy if it were practicable would be the most perfect government. Experience has proved that no position is more false than this. The ancient democracies in which the people themselves deliberated never possessed one good feature of government. Their very character was tyranny; their figure deformity."

(Alexander Hamilton (1755 – 1804). US Lawyer and politician. Speech June 1788)

The greatest weakness in attempting to encourage or even foist the notion of democracy on other organizations, or even other countries, is that most purportedly democratic advanced, western nations, especially America, are not true democracies in the absolute definition of the word; few, if any, countries in the continent of Africa are democracies in any sense of the word, indeed they are often dictatorships run along tribal lines and power is kept within a select group of political party members and controlled through a combination of police and military means and methods; most Middle East countries are not democracies in that they tend to be controlled by a combination of wealth and a ruling elite and sometimes with religious control and interference; the same can be applied to the Indian sub-continent where divisions within the societies in those nations determines social standing and status; and, one can hardly call the former communist countries of Russia and China democracies at all because, again, there is a controlling political elite that wields power and authority.

This is born out by the fact that approximately 10% of the wealthiest people in the United States own, literally, the vast bulk of that nation's wealth and power tends to be concentrated among a social and economic elite who influence politics and the political system; and the situation is little different in the United Kingdom.

The UK is not and never has been a democracy; it is a parliamentary democracy where elected representatives discuss, determine and vote, allegedly, on policies meant to be in the best interests of their electorate and the nation. In fact what we have are 656 MPs in the House of Commons who vote the way that their political party and leadership tell them to vote, through 'whipping', ergo, they vote to sustain their position, pay packet, allowances, perks and pensions and do not vote in the best interests of their constituents. Thus the system is not in the least democratic.

Thus, we live in a parliamentary democracy but somehow people feel, increasingly, that their interests are not being met, that their needs for the provision of public services such as health, education, policing and security are not being met, and, that, frustratingly, they have to accept that there is little they can do about it except to keep changing governments. The people of this country are dictated to first by the government of the day, and their elected representatives in the House of Commons, and then again by the elected and non-elected members of the European Union and Commission in Brussels, most of whom appear to be unaccountable when it boils down to conduct and governance and the use of public funds.

Perhaps it is time that democracy was returned to the people by greatly reducing the number of politicians and bureaucrats in governments and within all forms of political unions and returning more powers to local people and regional or local councils and with clear lines of responsibility and accountability to curb the possibility of excesses.

Even then there are no guarantees that an incoming administration will do things differently because politicians appear incapable of listening and understanding, they are keen to make decisions but appear totally reluctant to accept the notions of responsibility and accountability and will rarely tell the truth, choosing instead to, using an acceptable parliamentary term, dissemble. Little wonder that there is an undercurrent of dissatisfaction and increasing disharmony in a divided nation where the level of inequality continues to increase and where the gap between the rich and the poor is also increasing primarily because of unfairness in the way that taxation is collected and taken for the supposed good of the nation.

And, what has ruined the notion of democracy in supposed democratic countries? I suspect that, whilst there might be other contributory factors, it is the party political system, the two party system in the USA and the basic 3 party system in the UK, that has gradually but inexorably begun to undermine the very idea of democratic elections that allows the electorate to choose people, individuals, from their area and understanding their needs and requirements to represent their interests in a chamber of house of elected representatives.

Why? Because once you have party political systems then gradually they are taken over by like-minded people and they are supported by like-minded people and eventually they are influenced, in one way or another, by other people with power, leverage and interests to determine and agree policies that best meet the interests of the political party and not the best interests of the people who voted and elected their representatives to an assembly. Thus, politics is, eventually, hijacked by big business and big business interests.

I suspect, therefore, that it is not possible to have any form of democracy within any company or organization or any country for that matter for the simple reason that we are not all equal, we are not all born equal and we do not have complete and total equal access to all forms of education, training, health, employment and welfare systems and neither do we have access to an equality of job opportunities and employment prospects.

In fact, because of the political system the government of the day in UK now presides over a society that is increasingly divided, not just culturally divided by race because of an enormous influx of immigrants from the Middle East, Eastern Europe and Africa since the turn of the century, but divided politically, socially and economically. That is because the economic gains that have been made over the last 5 years have benefited the wealthiest levels in society the most and the result is a nation that is not at ease with itself because many feel, increasingly, not part of a socially democratic society.

Successive governments have ignored all notion of a fair system of taxation based on income and revenue and a degree of re-distribution in the pursuit of free-market forces that openly encourages greed and the pursuit of personal gain at the expense of those less fortunate. And, where greed exists and persists there can never be any success in trying to close the gap between the lowest quintile and the middle two quintiles and between the middle two quintiles and the top two quintiles in the economic ladder of society, thus perpetuating the social divide and negating any possibility of social democracy based on the principle of everyone having equal access to equal sources of health services and treatment, an equality of education and education services and, as near as possible, an equality of access to housing.

Whilst the electorate has a very small input to the election or selection of politicians and political leaders it has no power whatsoever over the appointment of individual ministers to positions of power, influence and responsibility nor on the decision-making process of the executive; political leaders will tend to surround themselves with like-minded and supportive politicians. And, whilst employees have no control over the company increasingly shareholders, the people who reputedly own the company, have little or no influence over the selection of senior managers to run companies in their best interest.

But, again, how does political manipulation have anything to do with the way that business and commercial organizations are led and managed, what has politics and democracy got to do with areas such as corporate governance and corporate social responsibility? And, is it fair to compare companies and business organizations with political systems? Can we really compare the way that companies are managed and the way that a country is controlled?

The simple answer must be yes because nation's tend to be controlled by a small group of people just like each company or each organization consists of hierarchical structures where only a few get to make the decisions that affect the majority, but that is as far as it goes. More often than not those lower down the organizational, or political structure, have little or no say in such matters as research and development, in training, in the choice of new products or models, in pay increases or in longer-term investment to sustain the company.

Besides, there is an overriding requirement for people heading up companies, organizations and countries to project the qualities of leadership and to make decisions in the best interests of all interested stakeholders. In truth, that is rarely if not never the case and all decisions taken at board level tend to be discussed, determined and defined in terms of increasing profitability in order to maintain the value of shares in the company, if a publicly quoted company, or retain the general power, influence and level of financial income and support from other sources if it is a public organization. Regrettably it is to be a truism that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely and that achieving such levels of power tends to attract not the incorruptible but the corruptible.

In the end it looks like we are stuck with our fallible system, at least for the time being, and the best that we can hope for is, perhaps, some form of benevolent dictatorship in life, in the general management, organization and administration of our country and society, in work and even, with tongue firmly in cheek, in the home.

Somehow I do not believe that I have actually answered the question to my own satisfaction let alone to the satisfaction of anyone who might read the article, provoke thought and stimulate discussion, form a view or an opinion and challenge my thoughts because it raises yet more questions, but it might make you think about where we might or where we could or even where we should go in the future and, perhaps, how much influence the world-wide-web and access to information and comments on databases will affect the way that political and commercial systems function.

(4510 words including quotations)

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