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The life and times of democracy



Speeches have been made in its honour. Lives were lost to create it. Wars have been fought to protect it. But is democracy really worth it? With a general election looming and our politicians held in lower esteem than even the most cynical would have thought possible, is democracy itself going through a crisis? One of Britain's leading political thinkers, Professor John Keane, will be asking what's so good about democracy when he delivers the Dundee Christmas Lecture this weekend. By Jack McKeown

Perhaps the most famous statement ever made about democracy is that it "is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

This was said, of course, by the endlessly quotable Winston Churchill. But does it still hold true? In the wake of a global recession, an expenses scandal and the sacking of independent advisers for doing no more than their job, can it really be said that democracy is still healthy.

Professor John Keane will be asking just this question when he delivers the Dundee Christmas Lecture on Saturday.

"All that evidence points towards Britain and Europe—and indeed most democracies—showing symptoms of decay," he says.

"A clear majority say they don't trust politicians. They think Parliament doesn't stand up to Government. There's too much whipping, the Government controls and manipulates Parliament too much.

"These trends are serious. One of the basic principles of democracy is for Parliament to hold Government accountable. It ought to worry anyone who cares about democracy."

Born in Australia and educated at the universities of Adelaide, Toronto and Cambridge, Professor Keane (60) is Professor of Politics at the University of Westminster, and at the Wissenschaftszentrum in Berlin.

In 1989 he founded the Centre for the Study of Democracy at Westminster University.

Since then he's written almost 20 books on democracy including his latest, the Life and Death of Democracy.

Aside from forging a reputation as one of Britain's leading political thinkers, Professor Keane led a relatively peaceful life investigating the past, present and future of

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democracy and making the occasional appearance on radio and television until earlier this year when, instead of commenting on the political stories of the day, he became the political story of the day.

His life took a turn for the bizarre this summer when the Iranian Government accused him of being an MI6 spy.

Following the highly-disputed June election that saw Mahmoud Ahmadinejad returned as President, the Iranian Government prosecuted more than 100 opposition figures.

At the same time they named Professor Keane along with German philosopher Jurgen Habermas and American philanthropist George Soros as examples of the West's attempt to overthrow the Islamic Republic of Iran.

"At first I let out a belly laugh," he explains. "But then I realised it was more serious than just a ridiculous accusation. Over 100 innocent people have been arrested over this.

"They said I was an MI6 and a CIA agent. It's true that I travelled to Iran to search for links with the Centre for the Study of Democracy and to find talented students to bring over here, but I was never anything more than a visiting academic—and certainly not some sort of James Bond spy.

"Following the disputed election the state prosecutor decided to tar and feather several intellectuals. It's ludicrous, or it would be if so many people weren't being put on trial."

Iran, of course, is a newer democracy than ours, and one in which the elected President is still subordinate to the Supreme Leader (though technically, our Prime Minister is subordinate to the unelected Queen). It can't be expected to run flawlessly and Professor Keane believes President Ahmadinejad's theft of the election will leave him lacking the authority to deal with the problems Iran faces. A strategy of non-violent protest will, he feels, eventually lead to freer and more fair elections.

Nor can we, in the UK, simply rest on our laurels and criticise less-developed nations' issues with democracy. We have enough problems of our own.

MPs have had their teeth taken from them, Professor Keane reckons, and they have less power now than at any point in recent history.

"In the 1940s and 50s, constituencies had enormous power over who the candidate would be. That's not the case anymore.

"There's a sense that people feel political parties are not for them. Fifty years ago, one in 11 British people were members of a political party. Today that number has fallen to one in 88. That's an eightfold reduction in the number of people who are paid-up members of a political party.

"A lot of people feel shut out. My kids are in their late teens and wouldn't be seen alive as members of a political party."

The shortage of paid-up members has meant that parties have increasingly come to rely on a small number of large donations by corporations and wealthy individuals.

"Large donations only add to the sense that the parties have been captured by special interests. A further knock-on effect of this is that most political parties now operate in the grey area of criminality.

"In order to attract funds you have cash for questions, cash for peerages, and all sorts of dodgy deals. Given that the cost of elections is rising exponentially, there is more pressure than ever on parties to raise finance."

Professor Keane is not a fan of what he sees as the cheap and easy option of publicly financing election campaigns to solve this issue of parties putting wealthy donors' interests first.

"Parties have to be made to work for their funds, they need to win back the trust of the voters and win back membership."

Of course there is one very notable example of a politician who eschewed large donations from special interests yet still managed to assemble a campaign war chest that broke all records. Sadly, however, he's not part of the British political scene.

"Obama's campaign ran counter to every other trend that was going on at the time," Professor Keane continues. "He used new communications technology such as the internet to turn fund-raising into a social experience, where people would get together with their neighbours and chip in a few quid each."

The American system is better tailored for the nation to rally around a single, charismatic individual, however. Back in Blighty, we vote for our local MP. The party decides who its leader is and, hence, who becomes Prime Minister.

In any case, you can't imagine glum old Gordon Brown or even "call me Dave"

Cameron being able to capture a nation's imagination in the way Obama did.

"America's open primary system is remarkable and is admired around the world. The feeling there is that there should be an open contest for the leaders of political parties.

"Here there's a deep and deepening sense of political parties being locked down and controlled by a few key individuals."

Though Parliament, party organisations and MPs are weaker than ever, Professor Keane sees some glimmers of hope.

"Since 1945 there has been a tremendous growth in extra-parliamentary watchdogs. I mean think tanks, Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs), other monitoring bodies—many of which have teeth.

"About 100 of these groups have sprung up since 1945.

"Whether it's children or human rights or environmental policy, there's a network of groups that exist outside of parliament and operate outside of election cycles.

"If anything, we're now moving towards a post-Westminster democracy. There's a new form of democracy where people feel they can identify with these groups more than with political parties.

"NGOs have a much higher rating in terms of trustworthiness than politicians do.

"The whole dynamic of politics is changing. The multiplication of organisations and networks, think tanks and monitoring institutions has changed the political landscape.

"One example is when the pressure group Plane Stupid got on the roof of the Palace of Westminster while Gordon Brown was speaking to the House of Commons.

"The Prime Minister told Parliament that policies are made under the roof of the house, not on the roof of the house. That's not exactly the case, because Government policy is increasingly being shaped by these kinds of unelected organisations."

Unelected organisations? That sounds sinister.

"On balance it's a positive trend. These bodies often increase scrutiny and shine a light where otherwise it would have been dark.

"What's startling is the reaction of political parties. On the whole they're reacting very slowly. Again, only Obama seems to really get these changes. His whole campaign strategy was based on being a community organiser. He knows what it's like to be on the outside looking in."

With trust for politicians at a low ebb, Professor Keane says we need to change our ideas about what democracy means.

"At the moment I think there's a disconnect, a large number of people who feel they can trust things being said by Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International but not things said by politicians and Prime Ministers.

"At the same time, there's a new understanding of democracy that stretches across borders. Democracy is now bigger than individual nations. The nation state is no longer big enough to deal with certain problems.

"The politics of climate change. The politics of immigration. The politics of the banking and credit sector. The politics of terrorism. None of these can be solved at state level.

"The scale of democracy has to be expanded. We can see a sign of this happening, with the Copenhagen meeting which should bring things to a head within a few weeks. Again, you'll have these monitoring bodies in attendance, helping make decisions and scrutinising them to see if pledges are stuck to.

"So for me, we're moving towards a time when democracy no longer means Government based on majority rule, it means public accountability."

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