

Political Thinking Meeting Report No 26

Chiltern U3A 'Political Thinking'

Meeting No 26 Monday 15th October 2018

Topic: 'Populism' is a recent development in many democratic countries. What is populism, what characterises it, why has it arisen, what are its dangers (and, if any, its claimed virtues), what can be done to counter it and what are the prospects of success in such an endeavour?

Summary

The most important political development in the early 21st century in Europe is the change away from the centre left political consensus. Toward on the one side, movements of national populism, supporting nationalist policies, broadly anti-immigration, protectionist, against and distrustful of supra-national bodies; and on the other side towards movements espousing extreme left wing policies.

The centre ground is being hollowed out, with the consequence that consensus on any policy is increasingly difficult to achieve. In these conditions the normal and previously established broad consensus of government is no longer there, the regular interchange between left and right bringing change of emphasis rather than direction no longer is occurring.

Is democratic government possible without some sort of broad consensus? We will find out by the mid 21st century.

Discussion

In Europe in the late 20th century from WWII until the Financial Crash of 2008 centre-left / centre-right policies were in the ascendant. These broadly accepted free market capitalism as the engine for prosperity. Economic growth was the objective, bringing rising living standards for all, not to the same degree of course.

De-regulation, controlled capitalism, reductions in global trade barriers, reducing the role of government, all seemed to work together to produce economic growth which benefitted everybody - nearly.

At the turn of the century doubts began to arise over increasing inequalities and the emergence of a very small group of super rich. Consequences for the planet such as global warming began to be recognised. But generally dealing with these was kicked down the road.

Both before and increasingly after the Financial Crash in 2008, politics began to change.

Whether it was the impact of mass immigration, possibly the most visible sign, or a backlash against cultural liberalisation or the loss of national sovereignty to apparently distant and unresponsive international bodies, or the failure of governments to regulate the bankers effectively - no doubt each played a part.

In many countries of Europe the nationalist right is on the upsurge. In Poland the Law and Justice Party has become the country's dominant political force, despite the country enjoying the fastest economic growth in Europe for many years. Macron's victory in France seemed to belie the trend, but this was short lived. Austria and Czechoslovakia turned to the right, and in Germany Merkel is watching her political power slip away as the right move into ascendancy

Italy has a strong anti-establishment party and also strong force on the right with the anti-immigrant views. In recent weeks differences between the recently elected government and the European Commission over economic policy threaten to destabilise European politics.

Centre right parties for example in normally tolerant Holland have accepted the nationalist rhetoric by telling immigrants to conform to the Dutch norms. Even in Scandinavia, the stronghold of centre-left parties for decades, nationalist tendencies are growing

The Brexit divide has paralysed political debate in the UK for 18 months since the referendum and arguably for much longer beforehand. The support for Brexit is not based on economics; that Britain will be worse off economically after any sort of Brexit is accepted.

Concern that the country is becoming overcrowded, perceived strains on housing and public services are all cited in support. That all these would be adversely affected by Brexit, made worse as a result, not better is an unheeded argument. Which seems to suggest that the policy drivers are not any of these. Nationalism in a pure form.

Where is all this leading? European policies to deal with mass immigration by sharing the burden have not succeeded; instead they have fuelled the politics of right wing nationalism. Increased protectionism, trade barriers, assertions of national rights and sovereignty are likely to follow. Ideals of international cooperation and liberalism will go into retreat.

Europe and the world of which it is a part will become poorer, not only economically but culturally. Whether democratic processes will survive is a reasonable question. Compromise and tolerance for the common good are essential; but these values are absent in the nationalist vocabulary. Will authoritarian regimes reassert themselves as the embodiment of the nationalist cause?