

Political Thinking Meeting Report No 37

Chiltern U3A 'Political Thinking'

Meeting No 37 Monday 15th July 2019

Topic; Representative Democracy

Summary

The discussion ranged over the issues of concern such as the role of the representatives, their qualities and fitness for the role, the processes by which representatives are selected, election procedures, and quotas for minorities. Some of the functioning of democracy such as the role of political parties and the way the civil service operates in coordination with political processes were reviewed.

Concerns were expressed that representative democracy as a political system did not seem to be operating effectively in the UK at present time, concerns for its future and hopes that a return to the more effective past would occur were expressed.

Discussion

Is representative democracy effective in providing good government in the UK at the present time?

Brexit has brought to the fore the question of whether MPs should receive instructions from their constituents and vote in accordance with these instructions, or whether MPs are elected to make up their own minds on specific issues after consulting with constituents. This of course is a long standing discussion; some members of the group considered that MPs should be bound by constituents' views, and others felt that once elected an MP should consult with constituents and then make up his own mind as to what he considers to be the better and vote accordingly.

Most considered that an MP should consult not only with his own party in his constituency, but also with those who did not vote for him, taking the view that once elected an MP should represent the entirety of his constituency. Whether or not this is practical or even possible without a consensus on what the best interest of his constituents might be was not addressed. It was recognised that the views of the minority under the FPTP electoral system still used in the UK are ignored, and the role of an MP should be to ensure that these views are somehow represented also.

There was considerable concern expressed about the qualifications required for an MP. Again this is a long standing debate; but many considered that a candidate should have had a “proper job,” whatever that might be, for some time before becoming an MP.

Substantial local connection with the constituency was also viewed as important. The current tendency for professional politicians with no non-political experience and no connection with the constituency was considered to be undermining of the representative nature of the role.

Selection of candidates by the very small and unrepresentative group of party members who have this role for whichever of the political parties was considered to a very undemocratic procedure; some support was expressed for the concept as in USA of primaries, a preliminary election with a much wider franchise than party members to select candidates as a more democratic means of selecting candidates for election.

As to Parliamentary elections there was broad consensus that the current FPTP system does not produce results that can be considered to be adequately representative. Chronic under-representation of smaller parties and the absence of subsequent representation for the “losing” minority were considered to be the main defects. However there was no enthusiasm for any of the forms of proportional representation that have been developed elsewhere; complexity and lack of local representativeness were considered the principal defects. But the case for a change to some form of PR remained overwhelming on democratic grounds.

The need for a competent and effective civil service to put into effect government policy was accepted. The current tendency for more political appointments was seen as detrimental to integrity and effectiveness; a breeding ground for the inexperienced with political aspirations.

Nostalgia was expressed for the simplicity and certainty of the politics of yesteryear, and indeed the hope was expressed that this style of representative democracy could return. It produced strong government with a large majority for the winning side, but the rights and wishes of the losing minority were taken into account somehow and did not seem to be lost entirely.

Overall there was considerable concern and indeed worry about the future of the UK political system. The Union itself is in doubt as majorities in Scotland and Ireland may not be supportive of Brexit and are able to express this. Multiple parties at elections, especially single issue parties expose the weaknesses of FPTP and make it very difficult to maintain that political systems result in representative democracy. Coalition governments were considered as necessarily weak and ineffective. That the major political parties are split by major irreconcilable differences reinforces the view both the major parties have become coalitions at civil war with each other. Neither appear to be capable of forming a coherent Government or Opposition.

Most worrying is the absence of recognition by major political parties that the system is flawed. Consequently there is no concerted effort to resolve the issues raised.

Merely carrying on as we are doing does not seem to be likely to resolve matters.