

Just One Cheer For Democracy

In 1951 E.M. Forster released a book with the title *Two Cheers for Democracy*. He claimed to know little about politics or economics but he knew full well the value of tolerance and wrote a eulogy of it in Part 1 of the book. Forster saw plenty of wrong in the world. He thought people went too far in giving three cheers for democracy as its supporters were wont to do for "at present she only deserves two" (p. xiv).

Presumably democracy is presented here as a woman of merit. As she has not lived up to her early promise Forster held that she no longer deserves all the cheers liberals gave her at first. Without a doubt democracy dazzled the liberals when she first met them, perhaps no one more so than James Mill and Francis Place. Before them, both Burke and Paine put their minds to the problem of providing a basis on which it could work.

Democracy holds the place it now holds alongside freedom as a purr-word because of the propaganda efforts of such eighteenth and nineteenth century liberals. Then came an attack from Alexis De Tocqueville, which had an impact on J. S. Mill and placed iron in the soul. The problem as found was the danger of intolerance from majority rule. Mill became worried that the masses would not be well enough educated to rule. In the twentieth century J.A. Schumpeter expressed similar views. He thought people would not understand capitalism, and so would use government power to harm or destroy it.

Tolerance Beats Love

Forster held that democracy had earned two cheers: "one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism. Two cheers are quite enough: there is no occasion to give three. Only *Love the Beloved Republic* deserves that" (p 67). But he knew that love does not make good politics and like most liberals he does not really have a high opinion of politics. It is tolerance not love

that we must show to others, for "love in public affairs does not work. It has been tried and tried again . . . and it has always failed ... The fact is that we can only love what we know personally" (p. 44). So criticism, tolerance and variety are what Forster valued. They are good liberal values. But can democracy supply them better than the free market? I think not.

Democracy tends to encourage conformity, and as a vote is cheap we lack incentive to think deeply about what is desirable. But the market makes us pay for what we want, so here thought is encouraged and rewarded. Others are allowed much greater leeway to be quite different at little cost to their neighbours in the market. With a collective vote we cannot have this freedom to go our own way. Instead we conform to a single decision. It is not hard to set why the market fosters tolerance or why democracy may foster ill-will and conformity.

Democracy has won a great propaganda victory and is now a purr-word along with justice, freedom, equality, and other ideals. They are often held to be intrinsically good in such a manner that any unfavourable effects of democracy in action, say in the French Revolution, are declared to be 'not quite democracy' rather than democracy causing harm. This effect seems unavoidable while democracy holds on to its supporters. But part of this dominance is because it is held up as an end rather than a means to other ends. Forster did not go along with that view.

Merits and Faults

What are the merits and faults of democracy in the main? It cannot replace the market in society for it is too slow and clumsy, whilst the risk of majority narrowness may make for moral as well as practical drawbacks. Democracy might have a use among a small group of friends going for a night out, or in a firm, or in a political group. In such groups it may provide the members with a sense of responsibility and worth. Giving them an aim of winning others over to their ideas should help to develop a spirit of co-operation and be socially unifying.

Although the democratic criterion of truth is merely a popular folly, the critical feedback gained by the use of a democratic veto is almost bound to be useful. This is especially so for more hot-headed participants who are more likely to overlook the consequences of their zeal. This need for agreement can often be beneficial to political groups while more often being a handicap to a business firm where time is of the essence.

That people have to be persuaded before certain decisions can be made stimulates critical discussion. It also encourages people who feel they know what should be done to make it explicit and subject it to the judgement of their peers. The result is highly likely to be more stable than if the group were to be run by a manager alone. This use seems to deserve a cheer, if only one, as a useful decision-making method. But even in this use democracy will not be resorted to very often because of the costs in time, money, effort, and so on.

A.N. Whitehead once held that the aim of mathematics was to save thought rather than to stimulate it. He likened mathematics to war, a problem to a battle, and the use of thought to the use of the cavalry: there could only be one or at the very most two uses of cavalry in a battle owing to the high cost and logistics involved; he held that it was similar for thought in a mathematical problem. Most work in mathematics is a purely mechanical application of the correct method. Democratic societies are very complex with a virtually infinite number of decisions being made by individuals daily. The scope for democratic decision-making must be more severely limited than thought in a mathematical problem, or cavalry charges in a battle, as elections and votes are so costly and time-consuming. The result is that democracy can be useful but not very useful. It has earned one cheer.

Free Life