

Democracy and Elite

Mordecai Roshwald

IF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE HOLDS as self-evident truth that all men are created equal, there is considerable evidence to refute this assertion. Surely experience tells us that we are not equal: some are rich, some are poor; some are wise, some are stupid; some are good, some are evil. Then, of course, there is a wide spectrum of nuances between each of these polarities.

It may be argued, and it has been maintained, that the differences are due to environmental conditions and external circumstances, whether geographical, historical, material, or social. This explains not only cultural differences, but also individual inequality. The children of affluent parents succeed better than the progeny of the poor. The superiority of social class is reflected in the performance of its members.

Yet, with all due consideration to this argument, the present writer insists on the basic diversity and inequality of humanity. One may attribute individual evil to the circumstances of a child's upbringing, but this does not explain why one individual turns out to become Attila the Hun, while another remains a mere gang leader. But let us adduce a personal argument, which may well represent the

findings of many others, and which may prove much more convincing. Irrespective of the conditions under which I have grown up, I am, and believe to have been from birth, inferior in my actual and potential capacity as a painter to Leonardo da Vinci, inferior in my musical talent to Mozart, in my poetic proclivity to Homer, in my scientific capability to Einstein, in my basketball agility to Jordan, in my capacity as a sprinter or a long-distance runner to the respective Olympic champions.

No, men, and women, are not created equal. They differ in their abilities, which are diverse and complex, they differ in intelligence, they are not alike in their physical qualities, they may differ in their moral character (whether in the latter case the difference is innate may well be questioned). Humanity consists of countless personalities, each combining diverse elements of physical and mental qualities in a distinctive way. Some of these qualities appear to be innate. Just as it is rare to find two individuals whose features are indistinguishable, so it is difficult to find individuals whose personalities are identical, and as external features display differences in beauty, so internal characteristics may vary in their degree of excellence.

Yet, if the Declaration of Independence errs in its assertion of human equality, it

MORDECAI ROSHWALD *taught for twenty-five years at the University of Minnesota.*

may well be right in allotting the same rights to every human being—namely, Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness (whatever it may mean). For even though we may be different from one another and some of us inferior to others, in one sense or another, we all have the right to Life and to Liberty, and to the pursuit of what we seem desirable, as long as we do not infringe on the rights of others by our pursuits. It is to secure these rights that governments are established, or their function is justified. Thus, individual rights lead to the establishment of social and political institutions.

The Declaration of Independence offers two grounds for the justification of political rule. One is that government secures the above-mentioned rights of the individual; another is that its power be derived from the consent of the governed. The first reason is functional—the assurance of benefits to the people. The second reason assumes the freedom, the sovereignty of the individuals over their own lives, which may be delegated to the government only by those individuals. The right to Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness is complemented by the right, the equal right, of all to establish government. Thus, while the government is to be established *for* the people, it must also depend on the basic decision and choice *of* the people. The two, essentially independent, grounds for the establishment and maintenance of government ought to be combined and coordinated.

How this is to be done is not explained in the Declaration of Independence, but it is elaborated in considerable detail in the Constitution of the United States. This document does not require exploration and interpretation here, but it ought to be pointed out that the gist of its articles is not to establish rule *by* the people, as the believers in the democratic tripod would expect. The American Constitution expresses the trust in *representative* democracy, the rule *by the few chosen by*

the many, a government deriving its authority from the people, but not a *direct* democracy, the rule of the people by the people themselves. The people's representatives, the President and the legislators, are chosen for a number of years—whether four, six, or two—but during those respective periods they have the right, and even the duty, to exercise the authority allotted them by the Constitution, *without* looking over their shoulders to make sure whether the people agree with them or not.

The principle of representation in government is based on the assumption of inequality of human qualifications, as far as the capacity for managing public affairs is concerned. People choose a president, or have him chosen by the electoral college, because he has some qualities which make him better suited for the job than others. They choose a senator, because they deem him politically wiser than themselves. At the same time, the principle of representation is based on the belief that the political official has to *represent* his electors, that he is not imposed on them by some external authority or power, but his authority originates in their will, the will of the people. In brief, representative democracy is based on the twin principles of equality of rights and inequality of political capacity and acumen.

The notion that some people are better suited to rule than others, that political wisdom is peculiar to the few, to an elite, and not to the many, the people, was, as is well-known, developed and vigorously advocated by Plato in his *Republic*. Plato's concern for excellence in government completely ignored the issue of representation. The authority of government, of good government, was to be derived from its intrinsic worth, and the will of the people, largely ignorant of the way of the pursuit of the political *summum bonum*, was of no account.

It was Aristotle, with his ear closer to experiential reality, who developed the notion that quality and quantity have to be combined in the working of government (*Politics*, 1296b). A viable and sensible government is one in which the democratic principle of equality and the oligarchic notion of excellence are deliberately mixed. The interests of the many and the wisdom and preeminence of the few are combined in a "mixed" constitution (*Politics*, 1294a-b). Aristotle rejected the popular direct democracy of Athens, but he also looked askance at Plato's design of a state in which the philosopher-kings are the absolute rulers, while the rest of the citizens are excluded from the government altogether (*Politics*, 1264b).

The general ideas of Aristotle, being somewhat peculiar to antiquity, had to undergo changes and modifications before being translated into the modern perception of Representative Democracy. Yet, the fundamental notion, that the wide democratic base of government and the select wisdom and virtue of an elite ought to be combined, became expressed in the principle of representation—the selection of the few by the many and the guidance of the governed by an elite. Modern democracy rejected the direct rule by the people, as practiced in ancient Athens, as it opposed the rule of an elite not accountable to the people, as propounded by Plato. It chose the ingenious way of creative compromise of Aristotle.

Alas, what was advocated and formulated by the Founding Fathers is questioned and undermined today. The prevalent sense of contemporary America seems to be that Democracy is the rule of the people, for the people, and by the people. It is the people who are sovereign in principle, and it is the people who have the right to exercise this sovereignty not only at periodic elections, but also continuously between the elections. The elected representatives, including the President, are

there to fulfil their assorted functions, but they must constantly and conscientiously watch the public mood and the popular opinion, and act in compliance with these. It is the popular will and the public sentiment which must be obeyed by the elected officials, even if such sentiment itself may not be consistent.

To be sure, according to the law and the Constitution, the elected officials are not bound by public opinion. They are free to follow the dictates of their own conscience and the conclusions of their own reason. Yet, in practice, more often than not, they obey the voice of the people. The old adage *vox populi vox Dei* tends to be religiously observed by most elected officials. And if occasionally they do not follow the commands of the majority, they adhere to the wishes of a select group, a minor deity, on whom their election to office depends.

How is the will of the people assured this overriding power? How do the people approximate the model of direct democracy, discarded by the Greek philosophers and their latter-day followers?

This is achieved by two measures. One is the subservience of officials to public opinion, by relinquishing their right to retain their individual convictions, without concern for re-election. Another is the continuous probing of public opinion on current issues by means of polls—conducted by political parties, special organizations, media of communication. Such polls, usually based on a representative statistical sample, can gauge public opinion with a considerable degree of accuracy. Thus, as public opinion is consistently explored and the elected officials are inclined scrupulously to follow it, American democracy increasingly becomes direct democracy—if not *de iure*, then *de facto*.

It will be said: "What is wrong with this state of things? Is not Democracy the rule of the people—the whole people and not

an elite, whether self-appointed or elected? The more the people dominate the political scene and control the government, the better! Who needs elites, anyway? The spirit of American democracy is opposed to elitism. We are all equal and let no one assume that he or she is better than others!"

Indeed, in the vogue of recent years "elitism" has become a pejorative term. If someone has elitist sentiments, he tends either to repress or to hide them. For being an elitist means that one assumes that some people are better than others in certain fields and therefore should be entrusted with a dominant or an authoritative position in that field. Yet, such a stance is exactly correct and it is shared, to some extent, almost by everybody, including the ardent egalitarians. Let us substantiate this assertion by a few examples.

If we face a health problem, to whom do we turn? Is it our neighbor? Or do we poll the opinion of the community? As is well known, we look for someone in the elite group known as the medical profession, and, in certain cases, we may even seek out the top of the profession, the *crème de la crème* of the medical establishment. If our automobile requires attention, we look for a suitable garage—again the professional elite—on the assumption that they know better how to take care of the machine than laymen in this field. If we want to enjoy a concert, we again turn to a certain group of musical elite, or buy a tape on which the performance of such a select group has been recorded.

One need not multiply examples to show that civilization—especially modern civilization—relies heavily on expertise, which is translated into the functions of specific elites in various and diverse spheres of human needs and activity. Indeed, the diverse elites are listed, though not exhausted, in the Yellow Pages.

This reasoning should lead us to the conclusion that in public affairs and in

political issues there are also those few who know better, in contrast to the crowd of ordinary citizens. Here, too, one would expect to find an elite, qualified experts who can guide us through the complexities of political endeavor.

Unfortunately, this conclusion is not as obvious as it may seem. For there seems to be no professional preparation for political leadership the way there is such schooling for physicians, mechanics, musicians, etc. Still, we must not infer from these reservations that all people are equally competent in resolving the manifold problems facing society. Some, apparently, are better than others in this respect.

According to the doctrine of Representative Democracy, such individuals may and ought to be identified and discovered through the process of democratic elections. The ordinary people, while less knowledgeable in matters politic, have the political instinct to choose those representatives who combine statesmanship, personal honesty, public dedication, and share the general philosophy with the voting public. These individuals will form the political elite during the prescribed term of their office. If they are judged to have failed, others will be elected in their place, when their term expires.

To be sure, this may not be the best method of establishing and maintaining a government. People can be mistaken in their judgment of the candidates for office, or even deliberately fooled by them. The complexity of social problems facing the elected officials, as well as of the political issues confronting them, may prove to be above and beyond their capacity, as they are beyond the understanding of the electorate. Therefore the system is not perfect, though it seems the least flawed of those available to us.

It may be suggested that if Representative Democracy is encumbered with all these reservations, and if so little enthusiasm is

evoked by it, the trend to entrust political affairs to the judgment and decision of the people themselves may well deserve encouragement. Why have representatives, why have an elite, in charge of public affairs? Let the people rule, and the more directly and comprehensively, the better.

Indeed, the idea is floated of polling a sample of voters on specific issues, using modern telecommunication media, and thus gauging public attitude on various issues. This could be broadened to encompass major issues of policy. The elected government, the elite, could be side-stepped and the people's sample, a true representation of the people, become the ultimate, truly democratic, political authority. We would thus return to the direct democracy of Athens, using modern technological and statistical techniques in order to apply the ancient system of a city-state to a modern super-state.

Alas, it is mistaken to conclude that direct democracy abolishes political elites. The direct democracy of Athens was still represented, as well as affected, by leadership of a kind, by its peculiar elite. It followed such men as Pericles, Cleon, Cleophon. Yet, as this short list shows, the quality of this political leadership was on a steep slope of decline. The direct democracy evolved to produce, or to become prey to, demagogues—leaders without vision or ideas, greedy for power, and both subservient to popular whims and ready to manipulate public sentiment. In the amorphous, fluctuating, erratic trends of public opinion, the demagogues create a temporary focus of purpose, which they readily discard, as soon as they sense a change in popular sentiment. They form an elite which is primarily concerned about its own advantage and power. They flatter the public and take advantage of it. They offer a momentary sense of direction, only to discard it the moment the wind changes its direction.

Thus, the real choice is not between

the rule of the people and the rule of an elite. The choice is between the rule of the people under the guidance of a reasonably competent and morally responsible elite and of an opportunistic and self-seeking elite. The Athenian democracy—with its insistence on the direct rule of its citizens—had no constitutional safeguards against the deterioration of its political leadership. American democracy, by virtue of being a representative democracy, has such safeguards. They consist of the independence of a large body of elected officials during their term of office, which ranges from two to six years, as compared with one year for the very few elected officials in Athens.

Yet, the modern safeguards are not foolproof. As long as the elected officials—the President, the Senators, the Representatives—religiously follow public opinion polls, continuously seek out the opinions of their constituents, carefully avoid policies which may be unpopular though justified in their opinion, they effectively give up their function as a political elite and succumb to erratic trends which have proved to be the undoing of the Athenian democracy.

To be sure, the times and the setting differ. While we may still have Cleons and Cleophons vying for power on the political scene, and competing for elected office, there are also other ways through which influence and power can be gained in our age, ways offered by the modern media of communication. These include newspapers, radio, and television. The first have some tradition of a detached analysis and evaluation of political issues, a tradition which is still continued in some publications. The other two, due to their very nature, are more likely to generate intellectual bubbles than serious reflection. This may be particularly true of television. Moreover, the interviewers on these media wield considerable power in setting up the discussion, in selecting the interviewees, in direct-

ing the talk with them, and between them and the public. This transpires on the proliferating "talk-shows," which captivate the attention of the American public. According to one report, one half of American adults listen to such talks at least once a week, and some talk-show hosts, like Rush Limbaugh, reach an audience of 20 million people.

All this involves the political ascendancy of the assorted journalists, television personalities, talk-radio hosts and the like. The gate is open to entertainers, ex-politicians, adventurers, to enter the arena of politics—ostensibly to provide information and to stimulate healthy discussion, but all too often to manipulate and control public opinion. Some of this new elite may be genuinely committed to an ideal, while others are self-seeking individuals trying to gain fame and power for themselves with little concern for the public weal. Moreover, the more popular personalities of the media can be of great help to political officials and candidates, and thus exert an indirect influence on the composition of the elected government.

Thus there is a possibility that in American democracy the leadership will at least partly slip into the hands of unelected and technically extra-constitutional individuals, eager for popularity and personal success and oblivious of public responsibility. This opens the door for demagoguery and may undermine the authority and stature of elected officials. Even if it would be an exaggeration to expect that this media elite will replace the official people's representatives, and make the latter completely dependent on the former, the ascendancy of the mediocracy threatens the present institutions and may facilitate the degeneration of representative democracy. We may well follow the pattern of decline of ancient Athens in our own peculiar modern way.

Are we doomed, or can we arrest the process? What can be done to reverse the

trend? We can try to answer the second question, while the first one will be answered by the steps actually taken.

First, there must be a public recognition of the true nature of representative democracy, which we have tried to convey here. Then the elected representatives, from the President downward, have to decide that once in office they are free to listen to and follow their own judgment and conscience, rather than obediently adhere to the demands of their constituents, even if this conduct should cost them re-election. Better be a one-term official who performs his duty honorably, than continue in office as a self-effacing spokesman of fashionable trends.

To reduce the tendency of public officials to curry favor with their potential electors, the period of election campaigns ought to be drastically reduced, as is the case in Britain, for example. This will enhance the chances that the elected officials will discount public opinion for a considerable part of their term in office.

Then, there should be a reduction, if not outright elimination, of public opinion polls on every conceivable public issue. Even more important is to discontinue the polls about the President's popularity. They turn the holder of the office—irrespective of the party he belongs to—into a hypochondriac, continuously having his pulse counted. A president cannot effectively preside if he is constantly checked about his political "health."

The "talk-shows" and public interviews on television may well go on. There is no way for a democratic regime to prevent the citizens from watching and participating in exchanges of ideas, even if these are often half-baked or biased, and not aimed at public weal. Perhaps there is even some benefit to be gained from such programs, as they may stimulate public interest and involvement in politics. Yet the public should realize that such talks and performances are not a substitute for an informed opinion about any issue, and

that one has to explore such an issue through written literature and not merely through select interviews and erratic chatting facilitated by the electronic media. This is a way, the way of knowledge, for each citizen to lift himself or herself into the ranks of the informed elite.

Representative Democracy in the United States is not lost yet. If not all the elected officials consult their conscience

all the time, at least some do so some times. The politicians listen to opinion polls, but they are not totally enslaved by them yet. The media wield undue influence, but they are not the decisive leadership yet. Still, the possible threat of political degeneration is clearly discernible, and its prevention demands vigilance, reconsideration of prevalent attitudes, and civic commitment on the part of the people and their elected representatives.