

The Wimbledon Philosophical Society

Note of a meeting of the Wimbledon Philosophical Society on the 24th April 2018 at Southside House on Democracy – is it failing as an electoral system?

The context of the discussion was that the virtues of British democracy have long been extolled widely and the ‘mother of all parliaments’ at Westminster put forward as the model for emerging democratic systems. Arguably however with our present voting system we have a defective form of representative democracy and a deficit of public trust. The economic crisis and political issues such as immigration have resulted in widespread division, anger and alienation. Populist governments are in the ascendancy and the mandate for democracy as the most effective form of representative government is being seriously challenged. Against this background the Society invited two distinguished thinkers and writers to open the discussion. Aharon Nathan, a member and sponsor of the Society, has long been a labourer in the garden of creating cohesive and flourishing societies. An advisor to Ben Gurion’s government he went on to set up and head the first civil administration in Gaza. He later formulated Total Representation (TR) as a system for handling deep divisions in society, the principles of which were adopted in the final report of the Commission on governance in Israel. He was at pains to preserve the constituency system of direct representation at the heart of our electoral system, but critical of the fact that many/most votes are wasted at present and smaller parties find it very difficult to secure national representation at Westminster. His proposals for TR were gentle reforms of what we have, so as to strengthen the political mandate through a fusion of

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Proportional Representation (PR) and First Past the Post systems (FPTP). He had recently published *The Crisis in our Democracy* co-authored with our second speaker.

Andrew Edwards also lives in Wimbledon and has extensive experience of both the UK and overseas governments. After leaving the Treasury, where he was Director-General on the public expenditure side, he advised former communist countries as they sought to develop democratic systems and modern industrial economies. He has worked on numerous issues of national importance and understands the machinery of political change.

He agreed with Aharon that FPTP avoided the instability of PR models but resulted in a democratic deficit through the number of wasted votes (losing and excess votes in excess of winning votes) and the disengagement that results from elections where majorities are inbuilt and the conclusion foregone. TR was a hybrid system designed to preserve direct representation but introduce limited proportionality, so that a limited number of seats would be allocated in proportion to total votes cast for each party (say 75 on top of 600 directly elected). Such a system in 2010 would have reduced the Conservatives by 17 seats and increased the Liberals by 20, and resulted in the same capacity for coalition as occurred. In 2015 the outcome would have been broadly the same. In 2017 a Conservative loss of 12 would have prevented the quasi-coalition with the DUP but left open other coalition options.

The big question was how to bring about such a change, given that the two major parties have a vested interest in the status quo. (Henry Ford said he would give one \$ to a man with a good idea and \$ 1million to one who could make it

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work). It would take a major event and an absurd outcome from the present system would not be enough. In 2015 Cameron secured a majority in the House with 25% of the electorate. An Electoral Commission was probably the best bet as a way of focusing public attention to pressurise for modest reform, but there was a limited chance only that that would happen either.

On referenda Andrew regretted their use as Party device to promote own agendas or internal unity. He proposed a Code of Practice to include rules that excluded their use for irreversible constitutional issues, for party as opposed to national issues, and required a 2/3 rds majority before being used as a basis for decision making.

In the ensuing discussion members queried whether the benefits of small, single issue, parties were sufficiently recognised in their influence on the policies of the main parties. The role of the press was emphasised both as a malign force representing narrow interests and as a hard check on executive power. Were there not more radical solutions to the democratic deficit perhaps based on modern information technology? The proposals on referenda were fully supported but there was a lingering dissatisfaction with the conclusion that, despite the strong political risk in present electoral systems failing to create trust and a clear democratic mandate, there were no accelerators which could be applied to conventional wisdom and entrenched party power.

The meeting closed with warm appreciation to Aharon and Andrew for their thought provoking introductions.