

# Preface

*Any civilization... will present a number of bizarre features which [people] accept as perfectly natural because they are familiar.*

(Miłosz 1985: xv)

## The Simple Theory

Like many another civilization, the European version has acquired, adopted, or simply just failed to question, a number of extraordinary beliefs. On the economic side, for example, we have slowly but surely converted what was the old vice of usury into the modern virtue of credit. As a result, most countries, banks and people are in debt, and all are intertwined. It is in fact bizarre.<sup>1</sup>

Another myth relates to that which we call democracy, arguably one of the vaguest terms in common usage. Some have tried to tie it down with what they regard as specific expressions like “democratic centralism” (Máo Zédōng), “democratic dictatorship” (Sékou Touré) and “democratic collectivism” (Jawaharlal Nehru). Others have spoken of “bourgeois democracy”, “proletarian democracy” (Vladimir Ilych Lenin) and “political democracy” (Fidel Castro). And then there are some other phrases like “majoritarian democracy”, “consociational democracy” and “consensus democracy”.

All of these terms, and especially the last three, refer to various interpretations of the word “democracy”, and all envisage different structures of government. Little wonder, then, that today’s democracies cover a wide spectrum of practice with but the one thread common to many of them: somewhere, at some stage or other, people cast a vote, and something, or someone, gains a majority.

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<sup>1</sup>The banking crisis of 2009 has caused some people – not many – to now question this practice; suffice here to say that these words also appeared in the 2002 first edition.

This, apparently, is the key, which makes it all “democratic”. It might involve an either/or vote on options **A** or **B**, or it might be just a vote on **A**, yes or no. As long as there is a vote which results in a clear majority, however, many people appear to be satisfied. Democracy is equated with majority rule and majority rule is assumed to be best effected by a majority vote. As we shall see, this too is bizarre.

[People] are captivated. . . by what may be called the mystique of the majority; it is often thought to be the foundation of democracy that the will of a majority should be paramount.

It is *not* the foundation of democracy, however. . . (Dummett 1997: 71)

## Majority Voting in Practice

### *Decision-Making*

In many instances of political decision-making, the “**A-or-B?**” question is the equivalent of the following: “Are you left-wing or right-wing?” The actual majority opinion, however, is often somewhere in the middle, in the realm of a silent majority. A better term would perhaps be the *silenced* majority, silenced by being presented with only two options, neither of which adequately represents their viewpoint? In some cases, then, the outcome of a majority vote will not even correspond with the real majority opinion, let alone “the will of the people”.

### *Elections*

Elections are also a little bizarre. Our elected members, it is said, represent their constituencies. As often as not, however, they primarily represent their party, and during the course of their tenure in office, they will probably do more for their party supporters in other constituencies than they will for many of their own electorates.

### *Governance*

In theory and sometimes too in practice, a parliament represents *everybody*, albeit with varying degrees of fairness. Invariably, however, the elected chamber then splits into two and the executive represents only the bigger “half”.

## The Book

The first edition of this book was published as a *samizdat* in 2002. Since then, I have worked in East and Southern Africa; undertaken a study tour in Lebanon; lectured

in the United States and across Western Europe; observed many elections for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE, in Central and Eastern Europe, from Kosovo to the Kyrgyz Republic; and most recently, in the wake of the Vladimir Putin / Mikhail Saakashvili war of 2008, I was a member of the EU monitoring mission in Georgia. Although these experiences have improved my knowledge of politics abroad, there are still many parts of the globe about which my knowledge is minimal. This may explain some inadequacies in the text, but I cannot use it as an excuse for them all.

The following pages examine the weaknesses of current “democratic” structures, and then consider some rather better procedures. The two chapters in Part I discuss decision-making, first the defects of present practice, and then a more inclusive *modus operandi*. In Part II, Chapters 3 and 4 examine electoral systems in a similar sequence, while Part III brings all of these ideas together in structures of government. In conclusion, the Epilogue then asks why such an inclusive ideal is not yet on most people’s agenda. There are, in addition, four appendices, illustrating both what is wrong and occasionally what is right in voting procedures, and I have also added a chronology of mainly Western democracy, to show when and where it all developed, and where too it suffered so many setbacks.

Just one small note on the nomenclature: options and candidates are lettered from the beginning of the alphabet, **A**, **B**, **C** and so on; voters of alternate gender are called J, K, L etc.; and political parties are named **W**, **X**, **Y** and **Z**.

## Thanks

I would like to offer my thanks to those who, yet again, have helped to turn my thoughts into what I hope has become a coherent text. In particular, I wish to offer my appreciation to Alan Quilley, whose diligent red pen on both drafts often took up more space than my black print. My friendship with Phil Kearney also goes back many years, and it is often his ideas which then have the semblance of being mine; the title, to take the first example, is his.

Next I would like to thank all those who continue to give their support to the work I do in the de Borda Institute: first and foremost, to the patrons and committee members, all of whom have given their time and energies on a voluntary basis. Of these, Professors Elizabeth Meehan of Queen’s University Belfast and John Baker of University College Dublin deserve especial mention, for she has given her name to many events, often in the role of chair, while John has done umpteen hours of technical work, developing computer programs and then analyzing votes. Another patron is Professor Arend Lijphart of the University of California, whose own personal journey away from majoritarianism has given him the perfect basis on which to write the foreword to this work. I must also thank those individuals and organizations that have helped to fund our endeavours, not least Stephen Pittam of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, which gave the Institute its first grant; there

are very few such NGOs which have survived for ten years and more on the basis of a lump sum of just £3,000.

Thanks too are due to those friends in like-minded associations such as the Society for Social Choice and Welfare, SCW, where Professors Hannu Nurmi (Turku), Don Saari (California) and Maurice Salles (Caen), have been very supportive. Without their explicit endorsement, the de Borda Institute would not have been able to wield as much influence as it now does. Meanwhile, at a local level, John Robb, Wes Holmes and other colleagues in the New Ireland Group, NIG, have often blown my trumpet, and it has been a joy to work with them. Another organization in which I have found much support and friendship is the Irish (and Northern Irish) Green Party, GP, where, thanks to Phil Kearney *et al*, consensus voting is now used on a regular basis. (Baker J 2008: 431–40) Hopefully, colleagues like Perry Walker of the New Economics Foundation and Gordon Burt in the Conflict Research Society will help to spread the practice in Britain. May I also mention a few brave hearts in the media, Roy Garland and William Graham of the *Irish News*, and Andy Pollak, formerly of the *Irish Times*, for they have supported some of the events which we have organized over the years, and questioned with their own pens the media's otherwise impregnable belief in majoritarianism. Acknowledgement too goes to Springer-Verlag for publishing this work and in particular to their editor, Barbara Fess; not everyone in the trade will take on a text which criticizes the bizarre. Lastly, yet most importantly, I want to say thanks indeed to those other friends not mentioned among the above, who have always given this very *un-Sovietski* dissident much needed support and encouragement.

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