

DEMOCRACY IN AN INDEPENDENT SCOTLAND, 2.9.13

Ben Wray - Common Weal

Intro: Ironic Syria

Ironic that I have meeting about what's wrong with British democracy and what could be right about Scottish democracy when, for maybe the first time in my lifetime, British democracy has actually achieved something. The vote against war in Syria was a victory for democracy against the hacks, party whips and careerism that almost always wins out. Although its worth putting the vote in its proper historical context. It's the first-time since 1782 that the House of Commons has voted against war. Its also worth saying that the vote against war in Syria was comparable with previous Tory rebellions over the EU, in the sense that the Tories were divided by different elite strategies for the British state at a time when Britain's role in the world is in transition. Tories never rebel unless they think the interests of the elite are potentially in danger.

Plan for meeting

Anyway, I want to argue that British democracy can no longer be recognised in any sense as a 'representative democracy', since its neither representative nor democratic. However, if we simply replace Westminster for Holyrood, we'll make some progress, but it will be quantitative rather than qualitative. That is, the PR system in Scotland is progress on first past the post, but it has failed to transform democratic participation in Scotland, with voter turnouts as low if not lower in Scottish elections as they are in Westminster elections. Secondly, local government is not really local at all, Scotland has the largest local councils in Europe, with the lowest participation in terms of candidates standing and voter turnout.

Therefore, for Scotland to have a qualitative shift in democratic form, it needs more radical ideas about what democracy means and what form it should take.

I'll argue that a radical approach to democracy in Scotland has to encompass change at three levels: the local, the national, and, most radically of all, at the workplace. In doing so, Scotland needs to be willing to adopt mixed democratic methods, with elements of participative and properly representative democracy.

Westminster democracy

voter turnout: 25% of votes can get Tories into power, and since nearly half the population don't vote, Westminster government can come from less than 15% of the population voting for them. Add into that the Scottish dimension, with only one MP here, and it becomes fairly straightforward to say that the population really doesn't elect those in power here.

'Apathy' and neoliberalism: It is complacent and elitist to understand this disengagement as purely about apathy. In another report titled 'The crisis of the British Regime', Adrian Cousins takes statistics from various opinion polls to analyse the trust and belief that the public have in political institutions. The results are stunning, and I would urge you to read the full report.

Two examples will suffice here: The "percentage who 'almost never' trust the British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party" has risen from 10% in 1974 to 40% in 2009; whilst the "percentage of respondents who believe there's a 'good deal of difference' between political parties" has declined from 82% to 12%.

Its clear that as neoliberalism has become increasingly hegemonic, democracy has waned. Its not difficult to see why this would be the case: since profit is king, the need for the mass of society to engage critically with the general organisation of things is unnecessary. The role of the citizen is to be as functional as possible within this framework. So University courses are increasingly departmentalised, so that we bring our children up to be, say, fantastic chemical engineers, but to not know or care about why they are doing the chemical engineering and for whom they are doing it.

Neoliberal politics is, therefore, a tool of governance, not representation. We elect parties who we think will be most effective at managing the capitalist economy, and the problems that come with it. When Blairites endlessly bang on about Labour being 'a party of government, not protest' this is what they mean: that the task of politics is to most effectively run a system in which corporations rule the economy, poverty and growing inequality are facts of life, and so on. The ruling ideology is the only possible ideology that can rule.

We should stop calling our Westminster system a 'representative' democracy because the government elected does not intend to meet the will of the people and does not receive votes of the overwhelming majority of the people. We should instead call it neoliberal democracy: yes there is a vote once every five years, but the vote is strictly for the party who the electorate believe is best at governing a neoliberal economy. No wonder voting turnout is in steady decline.

Nexus of power from corporate elites at Westminster (eg City of London remembrancer sits behind the chair in House of Commons to ensure its interests are protected) – how can they say trade-unions play to

Is Britain a democracy? Stuart Wilks-Heeg, the author of a recent report by Democratic Audit on democracy in Britain, has gone as far as to question “whether it's really representative democracy any more?”

Wilks-Heeg's report compared British democracy to other OECD countries on various scales and found it well behind. On all indicators of a democratic systems' representativeness Britain was in 'catastrophic decline'.

Wilks-Heeg puts the increase in political disengagement into its proper context:

"Over time, disengagement skews the political process yet further towards those who are already more advantaged by virtue of their wealth, education or professional connections. And without mass political participation, the sense of disconnection between citizens and their representatives will inevitably grow."

Scottish democracy

SNP argument: 'Scotland's future in Scotland's hands' no Tories and we get who we vote for – simple argument, but not transformational – doesn't challenge the more fundamental weaknesses of the democratic system.

There was a similar flurry of excitement around devolution, that it would be a much more open space where diverse views can have an input into, only for it to make way for corporate dominance

Voter turnout in Scottish elections is lower than for Westminster, our system means more votes count, but not enough people vote

National level – corporate capture, lobbying, lack of engagement: “Over 70 per cent of the Scottish population lives on an income lower than the average salary of £24,000 • Of the 'influencers' group (excluding elected politicians) only about three per cent have an income lower than the national average.”

Lobbying – Scottish Parliament-Business Exchange, Futures Forum.

What we want

Constitution – Should be written with proper democratic input, like in British Columbia or Iceland, or even better an actual constituent assembly

National – we don't want a new state to be carved out by big accounting firms and corporate vultures with the aid of unaccountable civil servants.

Radical decentralisation – Sao Paolo, participatory budgeting, local public services – not big society

Workers – trade-union rights, worker-management boards, and – eventually – participatory economics

Media – Scottish journalism collapsing – publicly funded press association

Discussion

Bob, Chris, Allan, Luke, Stuart, Pat and **Alister** contributed to the discussion raising the issues of what was meant by self-determination, monopoly ownership of land, water and the media; possible dangers of increased local democracy being used to promote cuts under Cameron's 'Great Society' proposals; the limited nature of democracy in the UK with the ruling class ability to resort to the Crown Powers, which the SNP would also maintain; the need for a written constitution and possible state financing of political parties: the need for a new Left/Socialist party.

Ben replied by saying that he agreed with most of the points being made. However, although he appreciated that the Right were promoting 'local democracy' for their own political reasons, it was important that socialists were able to mount a defence.