

McGill Summer School Address,

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DEMOCRACY UNDER ATTACK



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The 2018 MacGill Summer School focused on “The Future of Ireland in a New Europe: The challenge Ahead”. As is the practice, the published programme set down the background to the session and said that little was being heard in day to day discourse of the Union’s record on human rights and its defence of freedoms and and this was happening at a time when democracy itself was under attack. The programme went on to say that Europe was threatened within and without by extremist ideologies, aggressive regimes, discrimination and the rejection of democratic values. It consequently argued that the need for a strong Europe had never been greater. This paper opened the session on European values and took as its theme the organisers’ belief that democracy was under attack and clearly in peril. The author is a former General Secretary of the Labour Party, member of the Dáil, Seanad and European Parliament and campaign director in referenda on Europe. He is founder President of the Institute of International and European Affairs and of the Ireland China Institute. He was made a Chevalier of the Légion d’Honneur by the French government for his services to Europe.

Introduction

Democracy is not the norm – if democracy is to be defined as a form of government based on universal suffrage, the rule of law and respect for human rights. Yet we behave as if it is, and that’s a fundamental mistake; for in terms of human history democracy is the exception, and of such recent origin that it is hardly the skin on the apple.

In 1900, there wasn’t a single democracy in the world. No country had yet given the vote to women; nor to adult men under a certain age; nor to those below a particular property threshold. For some minorities the right to vote was a cruel fiction. Those with the right to vote were a privileged minority of the adult population. Governments were aristocratic and in most cases autocratic. Civil rights were constricted and often denied. In the main, they were window dressing for autocratic regimes. Government of the people – all of the people – by the people – all of the people – for the people – all of the people – was an aspiration, not a reality.

Of the fifty-one founder members of the United Nations in 1945 only fifteen could credibly be classified as democracies, and the remainder either as autocracies, theocracies or dictatorships.

The Newcomer

As a form of government, democracy is a newcomer that arrived late on the scene in Europe. The last of the dictatorships only disappeared in the 1970s. Of the twenty-eight Member States of the European Union eighteen were dictatorships at some point during the twentieth century, eleven had suffered under Russian domination and seven from home grown fascism, most had endured multiple forms of tyranny and/or military occupation, eleven had been subject nations within an empire, including Ireland.

Few of the Member States finished the century with the same national boundaries as those with which they had started. Most had been changed, in some cases substantially so, and in all instances as a result of war. Throughout the twentieth century national boundaries proved to be malleable, flexible, fluid, elastic (as they always had been). Moreover, the displacement of peoples and mass migrations proved to be as great as in any other period of history.

If the modern era began with the industrial revolution then it is barely 250 years old and mass democracy based on universal suffrage, the rule of law and respect for human rights has been in existence less than a hundred years. Hence, it is not even the skin on the apple of history. As a form of human organisation, democracy is still in its infancy.

So the depiction of contemporary Europe as a zone of long established democracies with settled populations and stable societies is grievously misleading. It is a myth and a dangerous one at that for it can lead to the mistaken diagnosis of current ills and, hence, to the wrong remedies.

Without question, democracy is presently under attack but the current fashion for strong leaders and populist movements based on nationalism, nourished by xenophobia and reeking of racial hatred is not a departure from the historic norm, and hence a cause for alarm, but rather is a reversion to the norm, and hence a

cause for real alarm. If so, that suggests a remedy beyond those currently on offer. This presentation will conclude by outlining one.

Mass Democracies

Given their relative novelty as a form of political organisation, mass democracies are difficult to construct, to organise, to manage and to sustain; there are no historical precedents to which one can turn for guidance; not the tiny polities of ancient Greece, as Aristotle makes clear in his "Politics", not the city states of medieval Europe, as Machiavelli's writings would confirm, and not even the United States, the oldest of democracies, nor the UK, that mother of parliaments, each sullied by their origins and subsequent record on human rights.

The uncomfortable truth, and the central thesis of this presentation, is that because of its uniqueness, and late stage development, democracy is a fragile form of government, as the Weimar Republic proved, and will be so for a long time ahead, especially for those which have only recently transitioned from being a Russian colony to a self-governing independent state.

The basic problem with sustaining mass democracies once they have been created is threefold: representation, communication and legitimation. Representation is the trickiest, as Burke set out in his address to the electors of Bristol. Are elected members of parliament envoys under instruction from their constituents or representatives free to exercise their own judgement on matters of state? There is no settled answer to that question, yet the political dilemma it raises as unavoidable. It is a function of numbers.

While the majority of EU Member States have populations of less than ten million, and so classify as small states, even those numbers make it impossible to practice direct democracy in the Athenian sense, and that would be even truer of the medium and larger sized Member States. Direct democracy is a utopian rather than

a workable system even though it is fashionable to believe otherwise. That leaves indirect or representative democracy as the only viable political system, plebiscitary democracy being dismissed as an impractical form of governance, as well as consultatory democracy based on digital technology the latest fad to distract us from the real issue.

To state the self evident, mass democracies on the European scale have to be structured around elected representatives sitting in national legislatures which, in turn, appoint collective executives. It is the nature of the beast. Within this system, political parties are indispensable both as mass organisations promoting a particular set of values and as the parliamentary groupings on which governments are based. Experience proves that democracy cannot function if it is centred around tiny factions, individuals, or so-called independents; that is the route to anarchy. In Europe, France may appear to be an exception with its hybrid system of president and parliament but, as co-habitation confirms, parliament and its chosen executive remain the lynchpin of its governance system, and rather than being an exception it proves the general rule that national legislatures are paramount.

Inherent Weakness

The logic of this line of reasoning leads to an inconvenient truth and it is this. Representative democracy has an inbuilt contradiction which, at worst, may prove its undoing and, at best, leads to periodic crises, causing great upheaval. The problem arises from an unavoidable contradiction which in normal times is manageable. But these are not normal times. It originates with problems of communication that ultimately affect legitimacy. It is true that the inherent strength of a collective executive is the legitimacy it derives from free elections and the authority conferred by an elected parliament but it is equally true that this strength simultaneously gives rise to an inherent weakness in the system.

It is caused by the psychological gap between the governing and the governed. Notwithstanding their use of TV and social media, public representatives are always open to the charge that they are remote from the electorate and out of touch with their needs, charges that are levelled with particular vehemence when they appear as candidates at election time. The inevitable distance between the elected and the electorate is normally bridged by a social contract based on trust and transparency whereby the governed consent to being governed because the system is seen as generally benign and broadly equitable, the prevalence of consent being the bedrock on which the whole democratic edifice rests.

In democracies, the executive branch governs; in autocracies it rules. The distinction is more than semantic.

But the social contract can be broken by government failure to anticipate, prevent or solve crises, by manifest inequality, by corruption or, more frequently, by its inability to explain the complexity of the democratic process and the difficulty of arriving at acceptable trade-offs, such as between the levels of taxation and expenditure, or trying to avoid the unequal distribution of costs and benefits associated with any government programme. Incomprehension caused by government failure or inability to communicate leaves it open to demagogic attack. Even in the tiny Greek polities, the demagogue could undermine democracy, and frequently did. In his treatise on politics, Aristotle has a section on why democracies fail (proving there's nothing new under the sun) in which he names no less than six that were brought down by demagogues and says there were many more that fell.

The key weakness seemed to have arisen, then as now, from the very nature of government. Those who govern are axiomatically an elite. That is unavoidable. At its politest, it gives rise to what might be called the "Dublin 4" syndrome and elsewhere as the "bubble" and leads inexorably to

a crisis of legitimacy; the acid eroding the base on which democracy rests is that elites are currently distrusted simply for being elites, and not only distrusted but derided by political outsiders, who promise to drain the swamp, and not only derided but despised by opponents in social media, who are vowed to destroy them, and not only despised but denounced by conventional media who have become what Steve Richards in his book, "The Rise of the Outsiders", calls "the real opposition".

Given that the social contract was shredded by the economic depression - caused by the financial and not the political system be it said - it was inevitable that what many saw as betrayal of a sacred trust would lead to a political insurrection fuelled by an anger that still burns, especially in this country, and rightly burns at what Ben Bernanke called "the worst financial crisis in global history, including the Great Depression".

Insurgency

Now, insurgent politics is nothing new. As Maurice Duverger outlined in his great work a half century ago, political parties generally replace each other in a sort of Darwinian struggle for supremacy and survival. The rise of social democratic parties in Europe before the First World War refashioned the party system of the previous century but are now themselves being replaced by an altogether different type of mass party, one based on identity rather than class.

Duverger pointed out that political structures, far from being immutable, are usually in a state of flux and, as the first half of the twentieth century showed, shifts in popular allegiance can be abrupt and seismic, dramatically testified by the demise of the Parliamentary Party here in Ireland and that of the Liberal Party in Britain. Within the past five years this phenomenon has been confirmed by the disappearance of the Parti Socialiste in France and the Christian Democratic Party in Italy, to name but two. There is no shortage of examples, nor of candidates for the chopping block.

But the process of change has itself undergone profound change this last decade with the advent of social media and the emergence of immigration as a core issue. It's obvious that by their very nature social media have accelerated the speed of change by eliminating entry barriers to electoral politics because they provide instant communication, universal access to the electorate and cost-free organisational tools. From a logistical perspective the entry barriers to electoral politics, which had been formidable and sometimes insuperable, have virtually disappeared. Consequently, new forms of political activism can spring up overnight against which representative democracies are ill prepared. By and large, their political structures are too cumbersome, their leaderships too diffuse, their appeal too insipid and their campaigning style no match for confrontation based on highly-charged abuse, personal vilification and outrageous lies. Their most ominous weakness is that they, the incumbents, play by the rule book whereas the insurgents tear it up and play by no book at all. As a result, one side is boxing by the Queensbury Rules, the other fighting under the rules of Mixed Martial Arts, such as they are.

This discrepancy is exacerbated if the insurgency is supported by mainline media, as it was by TV in the case of Trump and the tabloids in the case of Brexit, if it is led by a demagogue and if propelled by social media campaigns manipulating big data. But of these reinforcing mechanisms the demagogue is the key and, let loose, changes the game completely, as is evident in the current state of public discourse. Political debate, even up to the beginning of this century, was previously conducted under unspoken but universally accepted norms: self-imposed restraint, civility in dealing with opponents, common courtesy, moderation of language, respect for expertise, regard for tradition and custom and, above all, acceptance of the rule of law and the constraints it imposes even on the highest. We know this depiction to be generally true because these behavioural norms have

already been undermined to the point of being lost, as in the US, or is in the process of being lost, as in many parts of the EU, such as in Italy and Hungary. Political debate is now toxic and a reminder of the truism that it's only when something is lost that its real value becomes evident.

Indisputably, there has been a fundamental change this past decade in the conduct of politics with discomfiting echoes of the 1930s, particularly the re-emergence of racial politics. Which brings us to immigration, that other game changer mentioned earlier.

Immigration

Herman Van Rompuy, reflecting on his five years as President of the European Council, said that immigration was a crucial issue for the future of Europe but he wondered at the reluctance of mainstream politicians to discuss it. Yet it is obvious that alongside the great depression immigration is the twin cause of populism, more insidious than economic depression because it poisons public discourse, more threatening because it unleashes the worst demons of our nature (to misquote Lincoln) more insidious because brings forth the strong man or woman who builds xenophobic parties repeating the rhetoric and behaviour of fascism.

Despite the lessons of the 1930s these xenophobic parties have recently exploded in strength, even in what might have been regarded as the Union's heartland: the Netherlands, France, Germany and Italy. Some are already in office and together may well dominate the European Parliament to be elected next year. That would lead to a constitutional crisis by pitting the Parliament against the European Council and perhaps by paralysing the Council itself, as Italy has threatened to do. In the words of Pat Cox, who draws on a familiar historical analogy of the Iron Curtain, there is now a barbed wire fence running down the middle of Europe from the Gulf of Bothnia in the far north to the

Adriatic in the deep south. Nationalism is on the rampage again. So, the political repercussions of immigration have been profoundly negative, striking at the heart of the European project.

The preamble to the Lisbon Treaty refers to the very antithesis of nationalism, that of fostering solidarity between the peoples of Europe and drawing them closer together; but any sense of solidarity that previously animated the Union, weak and all as it was, has been the first victim of the immigration backlash. And a complementary casualty has been solidarity within societies due to the emergence of super patriots claiming to be the only true representatives of their country and culture, the "true Finns" syndrome, denouncing the rest as traitors or "enemies of the people". These super patriots are, of course, a latter day variant on old fashioned nationalism fuelled, as always, by a lethal combination of hatred, fanaticism and what Yeats called "passionate intensity". To use the words of Martin Wolf they have reawakened the "sleeping ogres of fear and hate".

For that reason, the organisers of this Summer School have warned that Europe is now threatened within and without by extremist ideologies, aggressive regimes and the rejection of democracy itself; that insight, together with this analysis, brings us back to the opening argument that contemporary society is reverting to the historic norm of the strong leader, authoritarianism, disrespect for human rights and disregard for the rule of law. That is the real cause for alarm, as was argued at the outset. The historic norm is heightened by the scale of immigration and by its potential to swamp Europe if the African population explosion is not contained within the next few decades.

Perhaps that's the reason why it's avoided by mainline politicians – but it's a separate issue and for another day.

Under Attack

Democracy is indeed under attack but I fear it will not be preserved unless democrats recognise

that the post-war political system is being replaced by a new order in which the battle lines are being drawn up between those who believe in the values on which democracy is based and those who don't. Class is no longer the cleavage dividing society, it is ethnic identity and that new reality has profound repercussions for the structure of the party system.

Simply put, there is no longer any sustainable rationale for the separate existence of Social Democratic and Christian Democratic parties. What they have in common is more important than what divides them. At base they are democrats, as their names testify, and if democracy is to be saved from attack they will have to unite around their common allegiance to the values on which Europe is founded rather than continuing as opponents in an outmoded struggle. If that is accepted then it follows logically that existing parties are redundant and I say this as the former General Secretary of the Labour Party in the full knowledge of what I am saying. The parties that were fashioned a century ago are being consigned by events to the dustbin of history, sad but true. The realignment of democratic forces is the only way to repel populism and failure to do so is a sure guarantee of defeat.

Now, it's obvious that this realignment can be either voluntary or forced but that it's unlikely to be voluntary; logic doesn't always prevail when power and position are at stake - in that case, it will be imposed on the existing parties by a new force, as has already happened in France. The victory of *La République en Marche* not only confirmed the speed at which political change can take place but also the well known historical phenomenon that one person, marked out by fate as a leader, can alter the course of history, sometimes at a stroke. Nothing happens, said Monnet in his memoirs, without the right man and nothing endures without the institution. Macron made it happen and has built a political movement that may well endure in France. He filled the void left by the failure of the Socialists, Centrists and Conservatives to readjust to new

times and as a result the structure of French politics has been re-cast. In place of the right/left confrontation it is now the democratic centre versus the insurgent populists, with extremes of left and right consigned to the wings.

Neither the extreme left nor right will defend democracy, they are committed to its destruction, while populists are committed to "illiberal democracy", a new description for authoritarianism. That is a pretty formidable combination and sufficient cause to force democrats everywhere to reflect on their responsibilities and to sink outmoded differences of second order importance and to unite around the only first order issue that matters: the preservation of democracy. Some movement in that direction has already occurred, such as the grand coalition in Germany and the tripartite alliance in the European Parliament, not to mention the de facto coalition here between Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, whose combined support, incidentally, only amounted to half the electorate in the last election, the other half going to what can only be called populist.

Sometimes events impose their own logic but the the missing piece for the ultimate success of democracy lies outside logic; as always, it is the need for a transformative leader and that, unfortunately, is in the gift of the gods and dependent on the caprice of history. France found a Macron but the wider Europe may not be so lucky. It was fortunate after the World War in the calibre of its leadership, especially in France, Germany and Italy, and fortunate twice over in the quality of the leadership that nursed their countries through the transition to democracy. The gods may not be so bountiful again.

The Threat to Democracy

The Schuman Declaration was made at a moment of great danger to world peace. It began with the statement that world peace would not be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which

threatened it. The same is true of the dangers threatening Europe today. The action to be taken must be proportionate to the challenge we face right now. The challenge is obvious. At present, bookshops are full of works on how democracy can die. Mainly they are prophetic rather than apocalyptic but the most chilling warning is that democracy can die not only through a revolution or a coup d'état but also through the systematic dismantling of free institutions, of rigging elections, of encroaching on the freedom of the courts, of controlling the media and by slowly eating away at civil rights.

The most ominous warning coming from these studies is the sly claim attributed to Mussolini that if you pluck the chicken a feather at a time nobody will notice it's bald until it's too late. If in your opinion this seems too outlandish for today's Europe so be it, but the belief that "it could never happen here" was found to be false in yesterday's Europe. Of course it could happen today. The chicken is being plucked. There are at least five European countries where the preconditions exist, where illiberal democrats are already in power. And outside forces are looking for other chickens to pluck - and roast.

If the worst were to happen and democracy were to be lost, or seriously compromised, then the loss would be catastrophic for what we Europeans possess cannot be found elsewhere. It's here in Europe that human rights have found their fullest expression and their strongest safeguards. The European Union by its very

foundation not only embedded democracy in the states emerging from the horrors of war but later provided a welcoming home for those states throwing off the chains of dictatorship, communist and fascist, a historic mission for which it gets little if any recognition.

Above all else, more significant by far than its economic and social achievements, the European Union has been the greatest democratic project in history, to quote John Hume. Think Germany and think Italy in 1950 when Schuman made his declaration. Think Greece, Spain and Portugal when their ruling dictatorships imploded in the 1970s. Think the former Soviet bloc countries restored to the European family in 2004. Think the Balkan states already members of the EU and those waiting in the queue to join. Think of what Europe could have been without the European Union. Think of what it is today because of what Schuman and Monnet began: the best place in the world, in history, to live in dignity, to rear a family, to grow old.

Conclusion

And then conclude that the case for a strong Europe has never been more pressing, the need to act never more compelling and the cause never so noble. In an analogous situation nearly a century ago Yeats said the best lacked all conviction while the worst were full of passionate intensity, that the centre could not hold. This time, let democrats prove he was mistaken.



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