

The Glass Ballot Box: Australia, the World Powers and the Advantages of Democracy

We have experienced momentous events in the last twenty years: the relative decline of the United States' economy, the dramatic revival of China, and a sense of threat for the world's democracies. In China, President Xi Jinping has been elected leader of his country for life, a reminder of its last life-long ruler Chairman Mao who, after his military triumphs, tended to preside over chaos.

In the democratic USA, Mr Trump is seen by many as another threat to democracy. North Korea, sitting like a noisy bird on the shoulders of both Trump and Xi Jinping, heightens the tension. Suddenly the fear of both a nuclear war and a destructive trade war have emerged. On present indications both fears are probably exaggerated. We can't penetrate the minds nor read the incoming emails of the two most powerful leaders: we can only speculate.

May I offer a perspective. The quick rise of China is like the quick rise to world prominence of the Soviet Union in the 1940s. It creates fear; it threatens to reshape our world.

The rise of the Soviet Union was probably the more disturbing of those two events. Its huge army had shown its strength by capturing nearly all of eastern Europe and some of central Europe. It was about to make its own nuclear weapons and to enter the space race: remember, the first human face in space was Russian. Meanwhile the victory of the communists in China in 1949 seemed indirectly to challenge democracy everywhere, for an unbroken red zone now stretched almost from the outskirts of Hong Kong to the border of Italy, from the Pacific Ocean to the Adriatic and the Baltic. Few predicted, however, that communist China and communist Russia would quarrel so quickly; but indeed within a decade they were ideological enemies.

The period between 1945 and 1970 remained disturbing for the democratic world. The USA was a mighty power, a vital defender of democracy, but still vulnerable. A dreadful phase was the tense confrontation – the nuclear-missile crisis in Cuba in 1962 – when John F. Kennedy was president of the United States.

I am not recalling the start of the Cold War in order to minimise the present confrontation between the United States and China – a situation seen by some as potentially a Second Cold War. This year's daily news is a legitimate cause for concern. As Australians we are especially concerned because we view China as lying in our corner of the globe. In contrast, in 1950, Stalin's Moscow seemed tucked away behind the Iron Curtain.

It might be argued that the relatively close relationship between China and Australia today, and the huge flow of commerce and tourism between the two nations is a factor for peace. But countries can enjoy the most intimate links and still quarrel and even declare war. On the eve of the First World War, England and Germany had intimate links. The powerful Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany was a grandson of Queen Victoria of England. The head of the German army, the strongest in Europe, had educated his daughter at an English boarding school. In scholarship, culture and science the links between Germany and England were intimate. Even Australia and Germany had close commercial links in 1914. Many critics mistakenly said that the First World War simply could not occur, or would be ended quickly, because the major nations depended intimately on each other in commerce and finance.

If the relationship between China and the United States should enter a thorny period that lasts, say, for 20 years, Australian governments might have to make difficult choices, both in trading alliances and in military alliances. Whose side will we be on? No doubt Canberra will make those choices, as

best it can. But any decision will be strongly affected – or even reversed – by decisions made in Washington and Beijing. They will decide whether we are important to them. Researchers sometimes tell us – mistakenly – that in our national crisis of January 1942, when Japanese forces were at our front gate – Mr John Curtin, our wartime prime minister, helped to persuade the USA instead of Britain to come to our aid. On the contrary the USA made that decision, unaided, with its own interests to the fore.

A smallish or middle-ranking democracy needs allies. My own belief is that democracies, much more than authoritarian nations, know by their very nature how to find allies: a democracy believes in negotiations and is more skilled in finding compromises. If China ever becomes the world's greatest military power, it will not necessarily dominate the world. Its opponents, by enlisting allies including India, might become far more powerful than China.

Australia in the last 150 years has gained enormously from military alliances. We have had excellent alliances with Britain and then with the United States, but most alliances in world history have had their defects and breaking points. A democracy, while fighting effectively once a war is well and truly under way, is slow to prepare for war. In peacetime a democratic nation can prepare effectively for war and call on its people to make sacrifices, only if public opinion is favourable. Public opinion was not favourable in Britain and in Australia in the 1930s, and so Germany as a dictatorship re-armed the more quickly.

Early in the Second World War the democratic allies, Britain and France, were not sufficiently equipped for war. Their combined population and wealth was far larger than Germany's, but they were nonplussed by the speed of the German conquest of western Europe in the middle of 1940. France collapsed – the most traumatic event in the history of modern mass-democracy. As a nation we have forgotten completely that the fall of Singapore in 1942 and the peril suddenly facing Australia were directly related to the fall of France two years earlier. The plan for the defence of the big British naval base at Singapore had relied on the British, if necessary, sending their powerful fleet to defend Singapore against the Japanese navy and air force, while the French fleet remained to defend and control the Mediterranean and north Atlantic sea lanes. Alas, the fall of France meant the loss, to Britain, of the French navy. Singapore was soon doomed after the Japanese in December 1941 made their lightning attack by air, sea and land on a vast expanse of territory extending from the former French Indo- China and British Hong Kong all the way to Manila and Jakarta, and Burma and northern New Guinea. In May 1942 the Battle of the Coral Sea, fought within easy flying distance from Cairns and Townsville, finally halted the Japanese. By then the United States was our vital ally.

Today, many Australians do not believe in allies: since 1916 there has been a fluctuating isolationist tradition on the left wing of national politics. It now has many supporters amongst Green as well as Labor politicians and supporters. But the idea that in an international crisis Australia can stand aside and declare itself neutral is a fantasy. A nation can only be neutral by consent – by the consent of its potential enemy.

To return to today's dilemma. When the USA became the top military power – and it still is – it carried the flag of democracy. The collapse of the European colonial empires and the spread of democracy in the period 1945-70 owed a lot to Washington's military power. 'The world must be made safe for democracy', said president Woodrow Wilson in Washington in 1917; and this belief became more emphatic in the second half of the 20th century.

But, today, China preaches a different message. As it becomes more influential, it will not try to advance democracy in Africa and Asia. China, after all, believes it has created its own superior

economic and political system, and indeed it emerged from the Global Financial Disaster of 2008 more quickly and less scarred than did the United States.

Therefore the continued rise of communist China could weaken the role of democracy in some parts of the world. At the start of this year China announced publicly that it should not follow the mistaken Western model of an independent judiciary. Indeed China, which for long has tried to be judge in its own disputes, recently rejected the verdict of an international tribunal that its occupation of tiny islands in the South China Sea was illegal.

DEMOCRACY IN THE WORLD

How safe is democracy's place in the world? The number of democracies in the world has increased remarkably since 1945. Indeed some historians and political scientists – with cheerful optimism – view democracy as the future condition of all nations.

There are various lists of democratic nations. Here is one list or ladder, compiled in 2017, and worth taking seriously. In evaluating a democracy, it includes a nation's electoral processes, the degree of public participation, civil liberties, the independence of the law courts, and the level of corruption. On top of the ladder sit 19 full democracies, and they are led by Norway and Iceland, Sweden and New Zealand. Australia comes 8th in the list, having lost marks for the degree of political participation. I find this a little surprising, for here is one of the few nations in the world to impose compulsory voting. Later I will say more about the nineteen top democratic nations. The next group consists of what are called flawed (or defective) democracies. The list is headed by South Korea, United States and Italy, being numbers 20, 21 and 22 in the total list. My own view is that those three 'flawed' democracies, and perhaps others, really belong to the top category. In the exact weighing of nations, some factors depend on the throw of the statistical dice.

Further along, all in the category called flawed democracies, stands Israel at number 30 while India comes in as number 42, well ahead of a few ex-communist European nations. Almost at the bottom of the flawed democracies is Papua New Guinea which stands at 75th in the whole world. Then come the troubled regimes which mix democracy with authoritarianism. On that section of the ladder Albania is the leader in place 77 overall and the East African nation of Mozambique is lucky to win a place. Finally, at place 116, commences the authoritarian regimes, just over fifty of them. Around the middle of those regimes sit Russia and China and the United Arab Emirates, with North Korea at the very bottom. The fascinating list, compiled in London by The Economist Intelligence Unit, has far more merits than defects.

The hallmarks of most of the top democracies are a high standard of living and a small slow-growing population (Germany and the United Kingdom are exceptions). Most of the top democracies stem from the Western cultural tradition, and have a history – longer than the average – of enjoying their political faith. Seven of the 19 have British roots, and five are Scandinavian. Only one has a low standard of living – Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. Democracy is more likely to be successful in a nation which has a measure of social cohesion: indeed a successful democracy tends to promote social cohesion. And yet successful democracies have slowly emerged in a few lands such as Switzerland and Mauritius which for long had seemingly lacked social cohesion.

Perhaps any kind of country can become a democracy in the long term; but some countries are far more likely than others. No Muslim-governed nation presently appears anywhere near the top rungs of the democratic ladder, though Malaysia is ranked at 59 and Indonesia and Tunis at 68 and 69. On the other hand Christianity and its predecessor Judaism had long sown democratic seeds as well as authoritarian seeds. The Protestant reformation in northern Europe in the sixteenth century

produced its share of autocrats but it proved to be one of the seedbeds of modern democracy. In insisting that everyone should learn to read the Bible, some Protestant sects fostered widespread education of children: a radical idea. They also fostered debate about religion and politics. Democracy, after all, is government by debate. Eventually some versions of Protestantism positively fostered religious toleration and civil liberties in the countries they controlled.

A good many commentators believe that democracy will continue to control more and more of the world. India, soon to be the most populous nation, is a special source of optimism. Here is a poor country, an Asian country, defeating the odds. And yet it is vital to remember that a crucial strand in western civilisation comes from Asia. The Jewish-Christian tradition arose in far western Asia, whence it was transferred to Europe.

Democracy has a long way to go if it is to fulfil its promise. Of the 167 nations in the world, democracy has been successful in less than half. Moreover, democracy is easier to practise in an individual nation than in an assembly of many nations.

The European Union, an attempt to avert the wars arising from a divided Europe, is an experiment in multi-nation democracy. Its first phase – the creation of a common market – was the easier task. That period of uniting was aided by two events of the period 1950-90: the military protection received at low expense from the United States, and the constant fear of a Soviet invasion. At times, however, western Europe's leaders doubted democracy's future. Willy Brandt, who had been chancellor of West Germany, predicted in the early 1970s that democracy in Western Europe could be in some danger. The European Union too might last no more than twenty years.

Since about 1990 the EU has been less successful. Economic strains emerged: Muslim and African immigration on too large a scale caused divisions; Britain is in the process of withdrawing; and some other member-nations are deeply discontented. Above all, while the standard of living and internal harmony have gained from the union, Europe has lost power politically. In proportion to their wealth Europeans militarily and politically no longer inhabit that high tower from which they once ruled much of the world.

The United Nations is another experiment in democracy or semi-democracy. Its upper house or Security Council include five great powers – the USA, France, Britain, the Russian Federation and China. They are permanent members and they have the power of veto. Not one is from Africa and Latin America. The big five excludes three of the five most populous nation of the world – India, Indonesia and Brazil – but they can take their place, if elected, amongst the ten short-term members of the council. The UN has a relatively small budget in relation to its ambitions and duties.

An important adventure, it has been infinitely more successful than its predecessor, the League of Nations, but just over half of its members represent nations which do not believe in democracy and an independent judiciary. Nonetheless one day, perhaps a century hence, there will be a first attempt at world government; and the United Nations, either by agreement or by conquest, will probably supply the framework.

DEMOCRACY IN AUSTRALIA

Australia is one of democracy's triumphs. Here is one of the two or three oldest continuous democracies in the world. In 1850 democracy had gained barely a toehold in this land but within a decade it became powerful, though not yet in Western Australia which received British convicts until 1868. The new parliaments were elected by a far larger section of the population than in England or

any almost other country. South Australia was the first to give a vote to every man in 1856, followed by Victoria, NSW and Queensland in the next four years. And who could stand for the lower house of parliament? In England a candidate had to own property but South Australia abolished this requirement in 1856, followed soon after by three other mainland colonies.

The Indigenous peoples see themselves as excluded, until recently, from these democratic reforms. It is a complicated story and some of their political grievances about the past are legitimate and deeply-felt but others seem to be imagined. In the most populous Australian colonies by 1860 most Aboriginal men did have the right to vote though few exercised it.

Another remarkable democratic innovation began here. In 1850, in every part of the world where a version of democratic electing was practiced, voting was a public event, and in no way was it secret. A voter turned up on election day and, in the presence of an electoral official, announced publicly his vote. But what if his employer, being present, did not like the way he voted? The recalcitrant employee might lose his job. The public nature of voting fed other mal-practices. Late on election day, if the contest was close, one wealthy candidate might round up potential supporters, offer them free alcohol or even money and then lead them to the polling booth where with his own eyes he could ensure that they voted for him. In response the secret ballot was introduced in Victoria in 1856 – a world first – with South Australia adopting the secret ballot a fortnight later. In many parts of the world it became known as the Australian ballot. In Australia the three-year parliament also became the norm: the politicians had to be accountable.

Another wave of democratic changes arrived in this corner of the world in the 1890s. The revolutionary idea was votes for women. New Zealand led the way, the first country in the world, followed a year later – in 1894 – by guess whom? By South Australia. In the federal elections of 1903 Australia became the first country in the world to allow women not only to vote but to stand for parliament. For these reforms groups of women had been amongst the ardent agitators, most forceful being the Women's Christian Temperance Union which hoped that a vote for women would curb the power of the alcohol industry. They eventually succeeded, partly through local plebiscites. In Victoria in the space of 30 years the number of hotels was almost halved, and eastern suburban Melbourne became an alcohol free-zone with no hotels and no licensed restaurants: it was here that the young Robert Gordon Menzies, not a teetotaler, found his political home.

Federation was a great step for Australian democracy, though I think it is not widely viewed as such by political scientists and historians. When six colonies surrendered part of their powers to the new Commonwealth in 1901 the Australian voters gained more freedom of choice. In a strict sense their freedom to decide was doubled. Every three years they voted at least twice, once at a state election and once at a federal election. Their freedom of choice on major matters was magnified. Queenslanders could vote primarily on matters affecting their state – say, the provision of water supplies or the sale and leasing of land. At a federal election they could vote on federal matters such as defence. To my mind federation was a major victory for democracy, but many Labor voters and politicians, and Greens too, would argue that there should be only one parliament in Australia and only one election – an election held every four years.

Of course, federation is untidy. It is imperfect, like all modes of government. But in the long term it is more efficient than a unitary government. Federalism is especially advantageous in a nation which, like Australia, occupies a huge area with a diversity in climates, natural resources and economic interests.

THE CONCLUSION

I do not need to dwell on the advantages of democracy. One asset of a real democracy is that it has a higher chance of avoiding a civil war. It possesses a culture and a formula for solving serious internal disputes.

Since 1945 civil war has probably caused more deaths than wars between nations. In the last 70 years the price of civil wars has been high. Civil wars in China in the late 1940s, in the Indian subcontinent in the late 1940s, in Indonesia in the mid 1960s each killed more than half a million people. Later the African civil wars in Sudan, Uganda, Ethiopia and Mozambique have each killed more than half a million people, and some of these civil wars have killed a million. Even Syria's civil war has probably cost close to HALF A million lives. It is a valid generalisation that civil wars are unlikely in a fully-fledged democracy. You may say that the United States during the years of the American Civil War (1861-65) was a fully-fledged democracy, but the southern Confederacy held too many slaves to be entitled to the name of democracy.

Another advantage of democracy is that it is suspicious of authoritarian rulers, and in several of the world crises has defeated dictators. Indeed the rise of democracy, in ancient Athens and in our world during the last two centuries, was promoted by a hatred of tyrants. Democracy also embodies an insight into human nature. Herodotus, perhaps the first famous historian, wrote that people holding too much power for too long become proud; they become contemptuous of those they govern. Long before the time of Christ he wrote: 'Pride precedes the fall'. The Old Testament and the New Testament often provided a vivid version of the same warning. They taught the virtues of humility and of humanity; they warned of the perils of pride.

Lord Acton, a friend and advisor of W.E Gladstone, the famous English prime minister, had studied history intensely. He owned a library of 59,000 books, and in thousands of them he wrote comments in ink. (Our generation was told not to deface our books with ink.) A zealous Catholic, he had studied past Popes and he did not exempt them from his scrutiny. He died in 1902, not far from Munich – the German city which was to become Hitler's stamping ground. In a private letter he warned: 'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' He was thinking not only about powerful rulers but also about all kinds of human beings, whether scientists, doctors, admirals, bishops, even historians and presumably heads of families.

Acton who died in 1902 did not live to see the coming to power of young Adolf Hitler and young Joseph Stalin, then alive and well. He did not live to see how all-powerful they became, and ultimately how many lives they destroyed.

Democracy is often the strong enemy of dictatorship. That's why it was crucial in defending civilisation in the 20th century, and could be crucial again. All honour to Paul Ramsay who bequeathed a fortune to create this brand-new centre for the study of western civilization. May his generosity give new generations of young Australians a deeper understanding of the traditions they inherited.

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This is an enlarged version of the speech, first delivered by Geoffrey Blainey on 4 April 2018.