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Decay and decadence of democracy

 By **Rodney Crisp** - posted Thursday, 19 March 2020

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The growing disenchantment with our political leaders, political parties and system of representative democracy merits reflection, not just by the specialists, but by all of us who have an invested interest in such matters.

The 2018 *Trust and Democracy in Australia* survey found that only 41% of voters were satisfied with democracy – down from 86% in 2007 and 72% in 2013. Federal government is trusted by just 31% of the population while state and local governments perform little better with just over a third of people trusting them. Ministers and MPs (whether federal or state) rate at just 21% while more than 60% of Australians believe that the honesty and integrity of politicians is very low.

Trust is lowest in political parties (16%) and web-based media (20%).

The situation is very similar in the US. The 2018 *American Institutional Confidence Poll* found that only 40% of respondents say they are "somewhat" or "very" satisfied with "how democracy is working in the United States". Political parties and congress come at the bottom of the list of the 20 US institutions in which respondents declare they have confidence.

Other countries with a low confidence rate in democracy include the UK and Poland (50%), France (34%), Italy (25%) and Greece (21%).

The Pew Research Centre's 2018 Liberal Democracy's Crisis of Confidence report makes a valuable contribution in helping identify some of the problems. A survey was conducted in 2017 in 38 nations on five different approaches to governing: representative democracy, direct democracy, rule by experts, military rule and rule by a strong leader who "can make decisions without interference from parliament or the courts".

The findings were eloquent. While it was generally considered that representative democracy was a good thing, there was also considerable support for direct democracy. A median of 66% across the 38 countries believed that "a system where citizens, not elected officials, vote directly on major national issues to decide what becomes law" would be a very or somewhat good way to govern their country.

The authors of the Pew Research concluded:

People generally like representative democracy in theory, but many are frustrated with it in practise. In surveys, many say that their vote does not give them an adequate voice in national politics, that elected officials do not care what people like them think, and that average citizens could do a better job than elected officials of dealing with their country's problems.

Representative democracy is a hybrid political system that combines characteristics of both democracy and oligarchy. While party candidates are democratically elected by the *dêmos* (people) to be their representatives, they continue to owe allegiance to their political parties and are held to toe the party line at the risk of exclusion.

Party line is a question of political ideology, but it is often influenced by the economic elite and special interest groups operating behind the scenes, when it is not simply promoting its own agenda. The *vox populi* is rarely audible and usually disregarded between elections. As a result, representative democracy tends to operate more as an oligarchy than as a democracy.

The fact is elected representatives have very little power individually but considerable power collectively. Hence the importance of respecting party discipline and toeing the party line when voting.

It is not surprising that an increasing number of electors consider that democratically elected political representatives are simply puppets on a string acting on orders from their political parties, not in the common interest, but in their own interests and in the interests of the economic elites and organised special interest groups.

The lack of an Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) at the federal level in Australia does nothing to allay this impression. Successive federal governments have constantly resisted calls to implement a federal ICAC despite a growing number of scandals involving federal politicians in corruption and misconduct in recent years.

According to the latest Essential Report (Jan. 2020), public support for a federal ICAC has reached an all-time high of 80%. Any further resistance from the federal government to the implementation of an ICAC could only aggravate the already heavily laden atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust surrounding federal politics and politicians.

The problem is that in a hybrid political regime of representative democracy as we have in Australia, the "representatives" consider that they dispose of a broad mandate by virtue of their popular election, to act as they deem necessary without having to consult the *dêmos* on specific issues. They consider that they are accountable only to their political parties for their decisions and actions.

It was the quest for freedom and equality that was the driving force for democracy as conceived by Solon and Cleisthenes in the 6th century BC in Athens. By freedom they meant that it was the people (*dêmos*) who have the power (*kratos*) to make the laws to which they accept to submit themselves. By equality they meant political equality (one man one vote).

Democracy as we conceive of it today, is, of course, quite different. The objective of modern democracy is justice. Thus, freedom is expressed as human rights, and equality includes not only political equality but also gender equality, equality of education and opportunity, decent living conditions and an equitable distribution of wealth. So how do we fare on that in Australia today?

According to the Inequality in Australia 2018 survey of the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and the University of New South Wales:

Australia's level of income is more unequal than the OECD average, but more equal than other major English-speaking countries including the United States and United Kingdom, which have very high levels of inequality. While Australian households are wealthy by world standards and wealth is more equally shared here than in most other OECD countries, wealth inequality in Australia is increasing :

- The wealthiest 20% own nearly two thirds of all wealth, while the lowest half own just 18%
- Australia has a substantial group of people with ultra-high wealth - the fifth highest number in the world, equal with France and Canada. In 2017 there were an estimated 3,000 Australians with wealth of more than \$US50 million (\$A74 million).

The Poverty in Australia 2020 report found that 3.24 million people in Australia (13.6% of the population) live below the poverty line – more than one in eight adults and one in six children. The poverty line (measured as 50% of median income) is \$A457 per week for a single adult.


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Only a few years ago, we used to pride ourselves in thinking that Australia was an egalitarian country.

The disappointing results we observe today are the logical consequences of the way our hybrid political system of representative democracy has been designed to operate. The first to take advantage of this were those who had positioned themselves, right from the beginning, at the very heart of the system: the political parties. The rapacious economic elite and well-organised special interest groups were quick to follow suit. All three (political parties, economic elites and special interest groups) perfectly identified and understood the weakness of the system and learned how to influence and manipulate it to further their own interests, in complete impunity, under the pretext of democracy.

Our hybrid system of representative democracy has been operating far too long almost exclusively as an oligarchy. The mandate of our elected representatives should be limited to the daily run-of-the-mill matters. All major issues should be dealt with by direct democracy, via a dedicated, state-of-the-art, electronic communications network.

Modern technology could provide us with the means to vote safely and securely. It could provide us with all the necessary information on the issues we are to vote on as well as videos of debates on the issues by competent specialists. We could also exchange ideas among ourselves on appropriate forums and social media.

All this pleads in favour of our active participation in the important political decisions that affect our lives and the lives of our families, friends and fellow Australians. Voting by direct democracy on issues we consider to be important is technically and economically possible.

It would be interesting to see if those who declare that they are dissatisfied with the way our democracy is working at present are prepared to devote the time and effort necessary to make it work to their satisfaction.

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Rodney Crisp is an international insurance and risk management consultant based in Paris. He was born in Cairns and grew up in Dalby on the Darling Downs where his family has been established for over a century and which he still considers as home. He continues to play an active role in daily life on the Darling Downs via internet. Rodney can be emailed at rod-christianne.crisp@orange.fr.

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