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There's Room For Debate

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Democracy can only work when citizens are both free and keen to hear arguments and speak their minds, argues IPA Senior Fellow Sherry Sufi.

Democracy is central to the Australian way of life. We take for granted that it is the best form of government, even if somewhat apologetically as the 'least bad' form of government, as if to indemnify ourselves from responsibility for democracy's perceived and actual flaws. Perhaps reflecting this equivocation, we observe that many—when a democratic vote results in the election of a government they despise—will not only start questioning the merits of that government, but democracy itself. This remains as true in domestic cases as it does abroad. Way back in 2005, IPA executive director John Roskam was invited onto an ABC program to review the record of the nearly decade-long Howard Government, with the host noting that “from the mail we get many *Counterpoint* listeners believe Australia is now ruled by a sort of mild fascist dictatorship”. Clearly the letter writers had no respect for the four election victories Howard had gained to that point.

In the USA, there was no shortage of those (Democrats, of course) who cast doubts over democracy as a system when Trump won the Presidency in 2016. Fast forward to 2020, and Trump's own support base cast even greater doubt on democracy when he lost to Biden, with the sought-for legitimacy plagued by allegations of nationwide electoral irregularities. Outside the Anglosphere, examples multiply. For instance, many questioned the legitimacy of the election of the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi as the Egyptian president in 2012, following the 'Arab Spring' anti-establishment uprisings. This doubt provided some cover for the military coup that followed.

Clearly the tendency to associate the value of the democratic process with our satisfaction with the outcome is not limited to any particular side of politics. If the result angers us, we cite the 'popular vote', 'Russian bots' (US 2016), or 'electoral irregularities' (2020). These challenging times provide an opportunity to reflect on the merits of democracy and work out how we, as a society, can get the best value out of it.

In earlier centuries, prior to modern democracy, most of the world's population was neither literate nor educated. People lived as part of some variation of a feudal society. They were ruled by a small but powerful group of elites who had a monopoly over the use of force. These were the Kings and Queens and, often, religious authorities, whose right to govern came not from the people, but from their idea of God. Hence the expression 'divine right' to rule. What's more, there was no news media, which meant no mechanism to ensure transparency and accountability to the public.

What might we do to make democracy work better for us?

Fast forward to the post-industrial age. Not only are we the products of a decade of compulsory education which allows more of us to have the capacity to ‘think’ for ourselves, we also have news media. In comparison to the peasants in the Middle Ages, we run a lower risk of being manipulated by our rulers (in theory, anyway). If our leaders do try, at least the press gallery is there to ensure they are held to account in ways Medieval monarchs were not.

Without endorsing American theorist Francis Fukuyama’s ‘end of history’ hypothesis in its entirety, we may still agree with his point that representative democracy is still the choice of the people, at least within the West. Rival systems such as those of China and Russia may control vast swathes of territory and population, and menace their neighbours, but their model of autocratic rule has no mass appeal and is not being emulated by other countries to any significant degree. As we have seen in Ukraine, once nations have had a taste of democracy, chances are they will fight to hold onto it. No other method of deriving consent to govern could be acceptable in an age of literacy, compulsory education, and mass media. Even the most ardent critics of democracy struggle to (credibly) prescribe an alternative system. If democracy cannot be replaced, then the question becomes: what might we do to make it work better for us?

Gary Oldman as Winston Churchill, *Darkest Hour* (2017).

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The short answer is this: by ensuring we explore *both sides* of the argument on key policy issues before taking a position. A population equipped with double-sided exposure is not guaranteed to make wiser choices, but a population with single-sided exposure is certainly guaranteed to be susceptible to far easier manipulation by political elites. At times that may mean domestic elites, and at other times foreign elites, each with their own vested interests. Just as we must learn economics in order not to be deceived by economists, there is wisdom in learning both sides of a political debate in order to avoid jumping on popular bandwagons and ending up being manipulated into supporting decisions and policies that may well work to our own long-term detriment.

As for the long answer, let us think a little harder about that example from earlier on. How does someone like Egypt’s Mohamed Morsi, an Islamist with a very parochial outlook, end up being democratically elected by the Egyptian people in 2012 in the first place? The fact his government barely lasted a year in office suggests we are not just being typically harsh judges when we view him this way through our outsider’s lens. The very population that took to the streets to rally in his favour would again take to the streets only a year later to oust him. This only starts to make sense once we understand that his campaign was based on an argument that remains unchallenged in Egyptian political thought: the idea that the bulk of Egypt’s domestic problems can be blamed on external factors. This belief has pervaded Egyptian, and more generally, Arab and Islamic political

attitudes since Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion of Egypt in 1798, and later, decades of British rule. Morsi gave the masses what they wanted to hear and was voted in, but was proven to be unpopular within a year due to his abject inability to govern a modern nation-state. Once understood, we see the flaw is not in the concept of democracy *per se*, but rather one that results from an electorate that has been sold a one-sided view of why things are as they are.

An informed citizenry is less likely to make unwise decisions.

Politicians—especially demagogues—find it easier to garner support on the foundation of such uniform and simplistic sentiments. This presents an opportunity to critically examine the nature of public opinion. But even with that, we must pause to follow our own advice and look at both sides of this argument; that democracy is indeed improved if free and open debate allows consideration of alternatives. The positive case is supported by German theorist Jürgen Habermas who idealised the concept of a public sphere with an informed citizenry free to make its choice: what he termed the 'ideal speech situation'.

A claimed benefit was that an informed citizenry would be less likely to make unwise decisions. This idea of 'collective intelligence' has been explored at length across multiple fields, from cognitive science to political philosophy to sociology. What the concept means is that group decisions are less likely to be unreasonable if certain liberties are afforded to debate, think, and express one's opinions. This is a bedrock argument for freedom of speech, even if one not as strong as the IPA's view that free speech is an inherent and inalienable right, grounded in one's status as an individual. (It is not as strong, because the speech is held to be truly valid if it contributes to the achievement of collective intelligence, whereas the IPA would even support one's right to say that which might detract, because who is to judge?). In any event, let us look at a key counter-argument, that public opinion is susceptible to manipulation by mass propaganda which undermines the hoped-for 'collective intelligence'.

In their 1988 publication *Manufacturing Consent*, American theorists Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman argued the point that the media, owned by a small group of agenda-driven political elites, essentially 'frame' certain ideas and present them to the masses in a particular manner that builds the public appetite to justify the decisions the elites wish made. In an article with the headline 'Leader X wants to invade Country Y', we might find all the details about how many troops are stationed on what border, how the neighbouring countries are frightened by this, and what a great violation of the 'rules-based order' this would be. That is, more or less, what makes up the word limit and no bandwidth is left to look at the political context that may have led to that escalation.

People being naturally unaccustomed to war and violence, if we were constantly exposed to headlines that only mentioned that a certain leader had an axe to grind against a certain neighbouring country without presenting both sides of the argument, chances are, the readers will start to believe Leader 'X' to be the bad guy in the story. According to Herman and Chomsky, once they start thinking that then the requisite conditions have been created for such a public to authorise its government to intervene militarily to stop Leader 'X'. The irony of such situations is

that the public ends up giving consent to invade a foreign country, in order to stop that country from invading another country: consent has been manufactured. Chomsky, then and now, is one of the most famous public intellectuals identified with the left, so it is somewhat ironic his arguments are now deployed just as readily by the sceptical right, particularly in the US, to question mainstream media agendas. Yet there has also been plenty of pushback against Chomsky's argument in the years that followed. American journalist Jamie Surowiecki, in his 2004 publication *The Wisdom of Crowds*, again made the case that large groups of individuals coming together to make decisions at the collective level are less likely to support unwise or indefensible ideas, policies, or decisions. In other cases, the wider the pool of participants in a decision-making chain, the less likely it may be that unreasonable ideas end up surviving that process to the end.

Dr Sherry Sufi in conversation with Professor Noam Chomsky

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Dr Sherry Sufi in conversation with Professor Noam Chomsky at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, United States in 2016.

The 'manufacturing consent' and 'wisdom of the crowds' hypotheses seem contradictory on the surface, but are not mutually incompatible. Whether one or the other best describes a specific situation depends very much on context. The presumption that underlies 'wisdom of the crowds' is that, when we bring together large numbers of participants in decision making, and therefore greater diversity of thought and internal debate, the participants end up exploring multiple viewpoints after which some form of consensus starts to emerge. This consensus being premised on a judgement made after exploring both sides of a debate makes this a work of shared wisdom.

When Chomsky and Herman talk about 'manufacturing consent', that is a specific reference to the information consumed by the masses that reaches them through certain media outlets and presupposes the recipients do not have access to alternatives. This ceased to be the case with the arrival of the internet and social media, and news diversity survives in the West ... for the most part, despite the onslaught of "Fact Checking", ghosting, cancel culture, and incidents such as President Trump's removal from Twitter. Compare this with the Egyptian education system and mostly State-run media being fairly uniform in its externalisation of blame for all domestic problems, such as colonialism and Western intervention. In those instances, the target audience is not being afforded the opportunity to explore both sides of a debate. The elites who control the flow of information through the media they own or have influence over set the agenda and tend to frame issues in a particular way. We may then agree that a public sphere that lacks exposure to both sides of an argument opens itself up to being manipulated by dilettantes, sophists, and rhetoricians.

Ensuring an informed public gets tricky in Australia.

The Oxford Union

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The Oxford Union has been encouraging debate since 1823.

In a representative democracy like ours, the public is the jury and the politicians play the roles of plaintiffs and defendants. We can usually think of governments as the defendants because they are attempting to run on their current track record, while the opposition question the government's track record. A population that has only heard one side of an argument is in no position to ascertain whether it has made a reasonable choice. Ensuring an informed public gets tricky in Australia, as we are constantly reminded at the dinner table or barbecues not to bring up politics and religion. (Believe it or not, there are societies around the world where politics and religion are actually people's *favourite* topics of conversation!). The traditional argument for this prohibition is that deeply held (and contrary) opinions make it advisable not to bring up such topics and thus avoid conflict. However, I am concerned the problem is more likely indifference and a lack of application of skills in critical thinking and discussion that we require to properly participate in a democracy.

This is closely related to the problem outlined in my last article '[Because History Matters](#)' ([IPA Review, Summer 2021/22](#)), where I argued for restoring the Humanities to their rightful place in the centre of our culture. A lack of appreciation for the humanities—and the subsequent inability to skilfully participate in the art of learned conversation—means that when confronted with controversial topics (like politics) many will not have much to contribute, and may end up just awkwardly nodding their heads out of politeness. Or they might retreat to dogmatic assertion of talking points picked up—almost incidentally—in their social media feeds.

By comparison, I find Americans embrace their politics with much greater fervour. Walking into a bar in Richmond, Virginia, and starting a conversation about who will win the next election is a lot easier than in Richmond, Victoria. French television is also famous for hosting a seemingly never-ending series of debates and genuine discussions in which public intellectuals expose their ideas to the merciless rejoinders of their ideological enemies. But here at home, we often hear: "Mate, Labor-Liberal, they're all as bad as each other!" We then often discover this utterance is by someone who is in fact very partisan in their voting, but does not wish to have their views tested. This sort of cultural mindset that does not take kindly to thinking, listening, and speaking about politics makes it difficult to raise proper awareness around critical decisions that concern our society.

This widespread public apathy towards politics, and towards religion, essentially creates the perfect conditions for the media to start focussing on clickbait headlines and 'gotcha' journalism. Media outlets are commercially driven: they supply what they believe is in demand. If there is a perception that the public is not even interested in exploring multiple sides to a key policy debate, then it goes without saying that a reasonable chunk of the news headlines will be focussed on salacious gossip and gaffes. Democracy may not be so flawed in and of itself after all, yet a



largely indifferent public certainly does a good job undermining the institution.

In a society so proud of its indifference to politics, the sorts of Australians who do end up joining a political party are in an absolutely negligible minority. The Labor and Liberal parties combined have close to 60,000 members nationally in a country with more than 25,000,000 people. The few that do take politics seriously, for the most part, do so with a remarkable degree of parochialism. Nowhere is the oft-repeated expression “all politics is local” truer than in the case of Australia, and perhaps New Zealand.

To the extent that Australians do think and talk about politics, their interest is limited to the extent of local, State, and Federal—typically in that order. International politics rarely makes the cut. Not only are they not into world affairs themselves, but their attitude towards the topic can often be marked with such contempt that if someone else at the table brought it up, then conversation can often be snubbed off with something that sounds like: “Mate, China, Russia, whatever! I don’t really get all that. All I know is I gotta put food on the table. Labor-Liberal they’re all the same, nobody’s helping us average folks.”

It goes without saying, Australia is geographically isolated from the rest of the world. My hometown Perth, in particular, is often spoken of as the world’s most isolated city. Geography determining destiny holds true in more ways than meets the eye. It is not surprising that this geographical isolation often comes to manifest itself as a kind of cultural isolation permeating our national mindset. Bali is often the furthest many Western Australians have been away from home. We conveniently live our lives as if we are floating in space, on our own, disconnected from the rest of the planet. We know, of course, that a world out there exists, but we do not always care for what goes on in it.

Unless we have chosen our mates highly selectively, an invitation to discuss anything to do with world politics at a backyard barbecue is unlikely to be taken up. Whether that be China’s ambitions to be the next world leader and its claims over Taiwan, or Russia’s beef with Ukraine, or the conflict over Kashmir between India and Pakistan, or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or (say) the quest for Catalan independence from Spain, the conversation will be strangled at birth. This is far from an ideal state of affairs. We may be geographically isolated, but we are certainly not politically isolated from the rest of the world. The risk is that we may not seek to influence the world, but the world will definitely seek to influence us.

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Maintaining our way of life requires understanding we exist within a broader solar system with other actors: some our allies, others our competitors, yet others potential enemies. We export to other countries. We buy imported goods. What goes on abroad ultimately has a direct impact on our ability to trade. It affects the price of commodities, particularly in the resources sector. It also impacts on our national security. Decisions we make which impact our economy and competitiveness may impede our ability to act independently and maintain national security. We



may not be interested in world politics, but when those with decision-making power decide it is time to send our troops in to Gallipoli or Vietnam or Afghanistan or Iraq, the ordinary folk pays for it, whether or not we like it, and whether or not these decisions are in our long-term interests. Since democracy has been so central to the Australian way of life since the beginning, it is imperative we pay a healthy degree of attention to *all* levels of politics—including international.

Given the elite pressures on media to limit complex consideration of political problems, it is in the interests of all Australians that key facets of our way of life are protected: people can speak their minds, media remains free of government restrictions, political parties can raise funds and compete for hearts and minds, State-run media does not control how issues are framed, and our education system encourages young people to think for themselves and discuss their developing ideas, free of the thought police. These are bedrock ideas of the Centre for the Australian Way of Life.

Without these critical cultural and legal institutions, we will become less like Jamie Surowiecki's *The Wisdom of Crowds* and more susceptible to becoming the living examples of Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent*. If the cultural demise we in Australia and more broadly in the Anglosphere face at present is to remotely stand any chance of successful reform, then we need to work towards revival of double-sided exposure to key political debates in our society. Only then can we say we have worked out how to make democracy work better for us.

For more information about the Centre for the Australian Way of Life, visit australia.ipa.org.au

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