



PATHS TO DEMOCRACY

Democratic transitions from around the world teach us about the future of free markets and free people, writes **Georgina Downer**.



GEORGINA DOWNER

Adjunct Fellow at the
Institute of Public Affairs

Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time...'

So spoke Winston Churchill two years after the end of World War II in the mother of parliaments, Westminster.

Exactly seventy years later, you'd be forgiven for thinking that we're about to abandon democracy. The controversies over the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, and more recently the unexpected results in the UK's Brexit referendum and the 2016 US presidential election, have given rise to concern that democracy is in decline. Indeed, according to Pew Research Centre, only 40 per cent of Australians are committed to representative democracy, while the Edelman Trust Barometer finds that only 42 per cent of Australians trust their institutions.


In the midst of such doom and gloom arrives former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's new book, *Democracy: Stories from the Long Road to Freedom*.

Rice is a fervent believer in democracy and its capacity to deliver freedom and human dignity. In *Democracy*, Rice explores her experiences observing and guiding democratic transitions around the world throughout her forty-year career, starting in the former Soviet states of Russia, Poland and Ukraine, and then to Kenya, Colombia, and finally (and most controversially) the Middle East.

In light of contemporary debates about democracy's decline, what is most interesting is Rice's assessment of the state of democracy and its future. She asks that we assess the successes and failures of democracy not 'with reference to today's headlines', but over 'history's long arc'.

By the numbers, democracy has been a successful growth story. From 1800, there has been a steady rise in the number of democracies around the world, and now the majority of the world's countries are democratic.

Rice is clear that the threats to the growth in democracy—including the failure of the democratic uprisings during the 'Arab Spring' and the backwards steps away from democratic governance in Russia, Poland, Turkey and Hungary—should not be viewed as a failure of the democratic model itself but rather evidence that democracy's progress is not linear. Democracy will have its ups and downs, it will be messy in its execution and, as Churchill said, never perfect. For Rice, the fact that there remain people around the world willing to risk their lives for democratic change is evidence enough that democracy is still considered the 'only form of government in which human beings reach full potential'.

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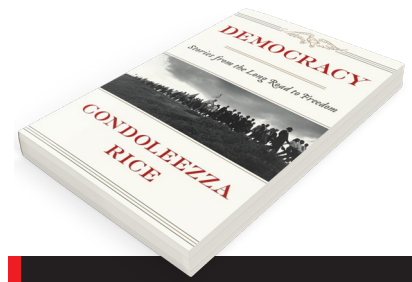
On Brexit, Rice provides a refreshing perspective. She refuses to accept the prevailing narrative that both the result and the anti-establishment trend in the West more generally is an indictment on the state of British democracy. Rather, she argues that such disruption is built into the very fabric of democracy—and social and political change should and does take place within these institutions. Democratic institutions are designed to be used as a vehicle through which citizens can seek change peacefully. This is the

difference between democracy and authoritarianism, where citizens agree to funnel their grievances through institutions, engaging, as de Tocqueville said, in a 'ceaseless agitation' to keep democracy.

Closer to home for Rice, it is clear she is not Donald Trump's number one fan—calling on him to withdraw from the Presidential race in October 2016 after his 2005 hot mic comments were released. Now he is in the job, she is more circumspect in her criticism of him as President (which a cynic may see as holding out hope of a position in the Administration in coming years). Rice limits herself to a general but serious concern about the rise of populism, nativism, protectionism and isolationism—which she labels the 'four horseman of the apocalypse'. In order to combat these, she calls for both politicians and elites to connect with their citizens, to understand and address their interests and concerns. If citizens lose interest and faith in politics, then that will compromise the health of the democratic system.

Of significant interest to many will be Rice's reflections on the neoconservative agenda of democracy promotion which became such a feature of the Bush Administration. As National Security Advisor and then Secretary of State in the Administration of President George W Bush, Rice was a figurehead of the 'freedom agenda' which captivated the neocons.

Critics of Rice will say she doesn't spend enough time in *Democracy* on the legacy and future of the neocon agenda. She justifies the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and subsequent US-led regime changes as a response to 'security problems', while admitting that military power is not 'a good way to create a democratic opening'. But she is



Democracy: Stories from the Long Road to Freedom

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frank about the failings of the US-led reconstruction in Iraq, if not falling short of taking any responsibility for the decisions herself.

In a nudge to the Trump Administration, Rice argues the moral and practical case for democracy promotion. Practically, it makes sense to have more democracies than less given that democracies don't go to war with each other. Morally, given democracy is our best chance to attain freedom, dignity and progress, this should be something available to all, not just those of us privileged to live in the democratic West. This can best be affected through US soft power and development assistance where it is needed.

Rice condemns President Obama's demotion of democracy promotion as part of US foreign policy, but is inconclusive about President Donald Trump and his foreign policy approach. Less than a year into the Trump Administration, it is premature to pass judgment on the Trump Doctrine and what it means for the world. But Rice is reassured that Trump is surrounded by a good team who might just believe in the good that the US can do if it remains an active advocate of free markets and free people. We'll just have to wait and see. 