

“Except for all the Rest”

By

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Just a couple of years ago, Russian presidential press secretary Dmitry Peskov told TASS, the State-run News Agency, that "Russia is an absolutely democratic country and very strong, very proud and very free people live in Russia. If anyone says otherwise, he or she doesn't know and doesn't understand our country."¹ This surprising, if not audacious, claim contradicts what most people around the world consider a democratic country to be.

According to Freedom House, the U.S.'s oldest organization dedicated to promoting democracy and freedom around the world, whose first chairperson was Eleanor Roosevelt in 1941, "Power in Russia's authoritarian political system is concentrated in the hands of President Vladimir Putin. With loyalist security forces, a subservient judiciary, a controlled media environment, and a legislature consisting of a ruling party and pliable opposition factions, the Kremlin manipulates elections and suppresses genuine dissent."²

This summary of the reality in Russia under Putin is undeniable. But Peskov went on to explain that just because Russian democracy differs from others, doesn't mean it's not democracy. "The United States has one system, France has another system, Germany has yet another system, and the Netherlands – another," he said. "And if we compared America with the Netherlands, America would look like nearly a dictatorship. But each country should be sovereign, each country has their system, which is rooted in its historical traditions, [and] stems from the level of its development and so on and so forth."³

It is true, Russia has held seven elections and had three Presidents since 1990, after the, so called, fall of Communism, which, arguably, means it is a democracy. Putin may well interfere with the process to favor his own political interest, but how does this differ from gerrymandering districts to favor one political party in the U.S.? Or a Supreme Court that stops a recount after an egregiously flawed election? Does this mean the U.S. isn't really a democracy? Or, if the U.S. is still a democracy under these circumstances, then why isn't Russia? Similarly, the U.S. media may not be state controlled, but its most highly rated news agencies are often extremely partisan and express unfettered political opinions meant to influence voters.

Those of us who have been around long enough to remember Communism's collapse would consider Mikhail Gorbachev Russia's most socially democratic leader even though he was the Communist Party's final General Secretary, appointed as such in 1985 by the Politburo, Russia's powerful Central Committee, not in a general election. It was his policies of *perestroika*, that sought to decentralize power, and *glasnost*, that opened the Iron Curtain so the Soviet Union could become part of the world community, that truly represented the democratic spirit. But the presidential national elections there, especially since Putin entered the scene, have not been conducted in this same spirit.

So, who is the true democratic leader, Putin who was elected in a national election, or Gorbachev who was appointed by the U.S.S.R.’s Central Committee? Who are the true democratic leaders, those in U.S. states attempting to nullify the black vote by gerrymandering voting districts, or an unelected Russian Head of State who helped end the Cold War and bring his revolutionary philosophies of *perestroika* and *glasnost* to the whole world?

Press Secretary Peskov makes a valid point, that the world’s democracies can be very different and are all far from perfect. In the U.S., for example, we have been enculturated to believe democracies must be Capitalistic and that Socialism and Communism fundamentally contradict Democracy. But there are dozens of democracies around the world that have Socialist or Labor Parties that govern their nations. The democracies of the United Kingdom and Canada are technically defined as Parliamentary Monarchies, whereas the U.S. is a Republic, or Representative Democracy. And this is what I want us to consider today, our own countries’ “systems” and “historical traditions,” as Petrov puts it, so we can better consider the strengths and weaknesses of the democratic governments we have in place.

As the saying attributed to Winston Churchill goes, “democracy is the worst form of Government except for all the rest.”⁴ Maybe that’s true, as I believe it is. But if we start from the position that Democracy is the best form of Government there is, we are less likely to be critical of it and to see its faults, or, more likely, the fault in how we’re executing its liberal principles (or not). Some may be emotionally driven to defend our form of government without ever having questioned or studied it enough to know if it’s worth defending. It’s just what we’re taught, ours is the greatest nation on Earth.

Paradigmatic thinking like this is thinking we’re so caught up in that we’re not even aware we’re thinking it, not any more than we think about the air we need to breathe as we go about our lives. It’s not until we find ourselves suddenly without oxygen that we remember it’s there and necessary. This is why it’s important to seek out the ideas we consider so obviously true that we don’t need to think about them. For us North Americans, especially us liberal North Americans, our commitment to individual freedom, which seems to imply democratic rule, is one of those paradigms we take for granted as “better than the rest.” We believe it is the solution to the problem of government.

But if this is so, how do we explain, as Petrov correctly points out, the many differences between democracies around the world? What makes them all democracies? Are some more democratic than others? And how do we justify democracy’s utility when entire democratic nations are increasingly divided on party lines, making it difficult for governments to ever get anything important accomplished for their citizens? If democracies are so great, how do we explain the hate and intolerance so many of their citizens have for the freedoms of those with whom they disagree? Doesn’t democracy also go against our apish instincts to rely upon a single powerful silverback to rule over and protect us in exchange for our obedience? Aren’t the Putins, and Napoleons, and Catherine IIs, and Alexanders, and John Pauls, and other dictators, generals, monarchs, emperors,

and Popes the more natural and instinctive choice for our species. If so, isn't democracy like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole? Aren't all democracies destined to fail and eventually be governed by populists to whom the rule of law doesn't apply because apish voters prefer authoritarian dictators to democratic principles?

These are the kinds of questions us liberal North Americans need to wrestle with if we are going to continue defending Democracy and to understand why it is worth defending and, most importantly, if we are going to have intellectual integrity and be honest with ourselves about it. As Socrates said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” To fully unfold as human beings, we must develop such intellectual integrity by questioning our assumptions, rather than simply embracing the comforting falsehoods that abound everywhere.

To consider the democratic paradigm in this manner, it is helpful to go back to its beginning, at least in Western culture rooted in ancient Hellenism. The first known Democracy, from the Greek words *demos*, meaning “people,” and *kratos*, meaning “rule,” emerged in Athens 2,500 years ago. Back then, Democracy was pretty simple. Each year, 500 citizens were selected to run the government and write new laws, which had to be voted upon by all citizens. Those who didn't participate in the democratic process were punished. That's simple enough if, that is, you were a free adult male. Women, children, and slaves were not considered citizens and, thus, didn't have a voice in how they were governed. This tendency to limit freedom to only a few continues to plague modern democracies, which is why the Women's Suffrage movement and Civil Rights movements occurred not too long ago, why voting rights for blacks is still an issue in the U.S., and why, little over a week ago, the Supreme Court had to rule in favor of fair access to the polls for all Alabama voters.

The famed Greek philosopher Plato thought a lot about Democracy some 2,500 years ago, as outlined in the *Republic*, in which he considers *Democracy* to be nearly the worst form of government, just a step above *Tyranny*. This was so because Plato didn't believe everyone wise enough to make good decisions. If everyone has a voice in government, including fools, which might be the majority of us, then we end up with a tyranny of the masses, so to speak. “How grandly Democracy sets her foot upon all our fine theories of education,” he said. Yet, “how little she cares for the training of her statesmen! The only qualification which she demands is the profession of patriotism. Such is democracy; a pleasing, lawless, various sort of government, distributing equality to equals and un-equals alike.”⁵

Plato preferred *Aristocracy* to all forms of government because aristocrats are not merely born but developed through education and training, then selected to lead based upon their intelligence and selfless goodwill. They are the Philosopher Kings you may have heard of whom Plato imagined and idealized; rulers with all the authority of monarchs to carry out their own machinations but with the wisdom of compassion to do so in the best interest of their citizens, not themselves. Ahh, poor Plato, the inventor of idealism, an idealist to the end.

Plato’s, like most Greek philosophy, became anathema throughout the Middle Ages during the reign of Roman Catholic Church. It wasn’t until the Reformation in the 14th century when some began criticizing and questioning the Church, leading the Renaissance, that a renewed interest in the works of Antiquity emerged, including an interest in Athenian Democracy. This was largely in response to the failures of both monarchy and the Church to prevent years of bloody and barbaric wars that brought nothing but misery to everyone. Surely there must be something better. Perhaps it was this thing called Democracy that the ancient Greeks had stumbled upon.

By the time these ideas began to flourish during the Enlightenment, along with Antiquity’s positive view of humanity articulated as “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” and in Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative, *that no person should be a means to someone else’s end, but should be considered and end within themselves*, developing a form of government demonstrative of these values became the primary focus of the greatest Enlightenment philosophers—John Locke, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Denis Diderot, among others.

Here I will allude to only three who represent the well-reasoned yet conflicting arguments for three competing kinds of Enlightened government—the *parliamentary*, the *royalist*, and the *republican*. Parliamentary democracy is not unlike the Aristocratic government envisioned by Plato, minus the monarch. Rather than one benevolent and wise Philosopher King, in a parliamentary democracy a king’s power is ideally offset by the authority of aristocrats who have been educated and trained to run the state in ways that promote general welfare. This system came to exist in England and its United Kingdom.

Today King Charles III is the kingdom’s hereditary Head of State and appoints the British Prime Minister. This decision, however, is largely ceremonial and is based upon the selection of the ruling party. It is, at best, a choice ceremonially confirmed by the King. It is a constitutional democracy in which the monarchy is limited by parliamentary law. This system was the favorite of French Enlightenment Philosopher Montesquieu, who said, “England is at present the most free country in the world, not accepting any Republic. I call it free because the king has not the power to do any imaginable harm, since his power is controlled and limited by statute ... at present full sovereignty is vested in Parliament and the king and executive power in the king, whose power is limited.”⁶

Montesquieu, who developed the concept of “separation of powers,” and utterly despised slavery and torture, particularly in prison, and prioritized individual freedom about all else, began in favor of a republican government, ruled by the will of free citizens, with no need for a monarch. But when he put it to the test by visiting Geneva where such a government existed, he saw nothing but economic inequality, poverty, and corruption. “In short,” writes Political Science Professor, Maurice Cranston, “Montesquieu discovered that the English system of constitutional monarchy succeeded better than any Republic he had seen in achieving the objective of a Republic, which was to combine liberty with law and enable a civil society to rule itself.”⁷ It says something that a philosopher devoted to individual freedom more than most others would think a parliamentary monarchy more conducive to such than the kind of democracy more akin to what now exists in the U.S. I wonder what he would have thought about three different populist British Prime Ministers coming and going in one year.

Voltaire also highly prized individual freedom, which he saw as the “absence of constraint,” which, to him, meant as few laws as possible. As much as there was to admire about the English system, Voltaire was not impressed with its Parliamentary division into a House of Lords and House of Commons. He considered the English nobility to be tyrants, plunderers, and barons who historically victimized commoners. To avoid such, a monarch must be unconstrained by them to pass laws that will benefit and secure individual freedom and general welfare.

On the other hand, he didn’t care for a republic, in which citizens rule, because such a system he said, “is founded upon the ambition of every citizen,”⁸ which will inevitably lead to the desire of some to dominate others. “A republic is a society where the diners, with equal appetite, eat at the same table until there appears a vigorous and voracious man who takes the lot for himself and leaves the crumbs to the others.”⁹ Such a statement could be used to describe the “trickle-down-economics” established during Ronald Reagan’s Presidency, or to the unprecedented economic inequality that exists in the U.S. and other democracies today.

Today the idea of a benevolent ruler, Plato’s Philosopher King, unaccountable to any kind of legislative branch is difficult for us to embrace. But, as Enlightenment historian, Richie Robertson writes, “A good king, whose first and all absorbing concern was the happiness of his people, became the ideal of enlightened absolutism.”¹⁰ That’s another term for *royalism*, the idea that a monarch devoted to Enlightenment values—human welfare, freedom, reason, and tolerance—would lead to the best of all possible governments. (That’s hard for us to imagine today, but who would you prefer govern your country, a Dictator named Gorbachev or a President named Trump?)

A third French Enlightenment philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau argued that a republic would be the best form of government—a representative government chosen by citizens without any sort of monarch. Rousseau, who developed a theory of evolution long before Darwin, believed human beings had lost their natural state of freedom by becoming civilized, the worst example of which is slavery, and that a democratic republic was the only way to artificially reestablish their natural freedom and, with it, the capacity to improve and achieve their full potential. Rousseau believed in the innate goodness of humanity, and that it could be unlocked by recreating its natural state of freedom. As Cranston puts it, Rousseau “believed it was possible to combine liberty and law, by instituting a regime which would enable men to rule themselves.”¹¹

I’m not going to conclude by arguing which kind of government I think is best. My point has only been to show that all kinds of governments, including democracies, have problems, largely because individual freedom often conflicts with common interests. Some governments lean more heavily toward law and order at the expense of individual freedom, and some toward individual freedom at the expense of law and order.

Forty-three years ago, right after being elected to head the U.S. Government, President Ronald Reagan told us, “Government is not the solution to our problem. Government is the problem.” (This, again, is the man who had just been elected to run the Government!) He then set out to eliminate its powers to regulate industries and corporations that, unfettered, have caused extreme harm to human welfare and our environment, and to dismantle the FDR reforms that had once propped up Middle Class America, and to diminish the power of unions and workers rights, and to

reduce funding for social programs, including education. And this weakening and dismantling of our government and its programs has been the Republican party’s main cause ever since. Today this agenda means corporations are persons, money is free speech, that we can keep pumping carbon emissions into the air, and that people are free to own military style weapons and to commit mass homicide with no new laws or regulations to prevent them from doing so.

Like all governments, ours is not a perfect Union, but the one thing all these Enlightenment thinkers shared in common, including those who fashioned our modern democracies, is that government had to be part of the solution. They understood that a sane and peaceful society needs both a degree of personal freedom and individual responsibility. We need freedom from both tyranny and lawlessness. Imagining, fashioning, and maintaining a government that can manage both these things is part of what it means to be liberal. Liberals believe in government. Liberals invented modern democratic government.

Today I don’t believe we can continue dismissing our responsibility to rebuild a sensible and stable government by simply assuming ours is best compared to all the rest, and thus as good as it’s ever going to get. As liberals who care about freedom and human welfare above all, we must proudly and boldly reclaim our liberal heritage and responsibility to fashion societies and governments that satisfy these aims. Our light has been tucked under a bushel for too long. It is time to let it shine again. Because our world needs its brilliance and warmth now, as much as it ever has.

¹ <https://tass.com/politics/1381099>

² <https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia>

³ <https://tass.com/politics/1381099>

⁴ Rosling, Hans, *Factfulness*, Flatiron Books, New York, NY, 2018, p. 291.

⁵ Plato. *The Republic* (p. 1). Kindle Edition.

⁶ Cranston, Maurice, *Philosophers and Pamphleteers*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1986, p. 18

⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

⁸ Ibid., p. 42.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Robertson, Richie, *The Enlightenment*, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 2021, p. 6.

¹¹ Cranston, *ibid.*, p. 83.