

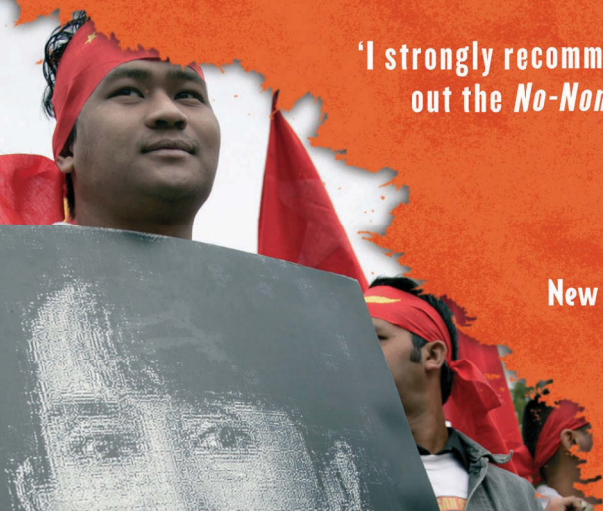
The **NO-NONSENSE GUIDE** to

DEMOCRACY

Richard Swift

'I strongly recommend you check
out the *No-Nonsense Guides*'
Howard Zinn

New Internationalist



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DEMOCRACY

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'Publishers have created lists of short books that discuss the questions that your average [electoral] candidate will only ever touch if armed with a slogan and a soundbite. Together [such books] hint at a resurgence of the grand educational tradition... Closest to the hot headline issues are *The No-Nonsense Guides*. These target those topics that a large army of voters care about, but that politicians evade. Arguments, figures and documents combine to prove that good journalism is far too important to be left to (most) journalists.'

Boyd Tonkin,
The Independent,
London

To my son, Josh.

About the author

Richard Swift is a former co-editor of **New Internationalist** magazine. He has worked in radio journalism and alternative publishing for many years and is currently freelancing. He has a long-standing interest in questions of ecology and democracy.

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If you like this *No-Nonsense Guide* you'll also enjoy the **New Internationalist** magazine. Each month it takes a different subject such as *Trade Justice*, *Afghanistan* or *Clean Start: building a fairer global economy*, exploring and explaining the issues in a concise way; the magazine is full of photos, charts and graphs as well as music, film and book reviews, country profiles, interviews and news.

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Foreword

ONE OF THE main themes of *The No-Nonsense Guide to Democracy* is Richard Swift's cogent argument that the free market – contrary to mainstream commonsense – is an anti-democratic force. Under the ideology of the free market, the market 'decides' vital social matters that in a democracy would be decided by the people. And not surprisingly, the free market *always* decides that some will get (stay) rich and others will get (stay) poor. Moreover, as the market image comes to permeate society as a whole, it begins to shape the political world as well, and citizens are transformed into 'consumers of politics', an audience for the antics of political superstars.

Globalization, Swift argues, carries this a step further. Decisions vitally affecting the lives of the people are taken out of the hands of the state (where the people had some chance of influencing them) and raised to the 'political stratosphere' of international trade and finance organizations (where the people had no chance of influencing them – until Seattle).

Globalization reproduces inequality in a different form, and simultaneously protects the privileged against its effects. The 'democratic' propertied class in the capitalist countries of the Global North guard themselves against a 'vote against all property' by 'exporting' the most impoverished section of their working class to the Global South. In this case, decisions that affect the lives of these workers are made in a different country, where under the nation-state system they have no voice – if indeed they have any political voice in their own countries, many of which are military or other forms of dictatorships. Of course this system is as old as colonialism; 'economic development' and 'globalization' are only its most recent incarnations.

Swift makes clear that 'democracy' is not the name of a system of government existing in certain countries, but rather the endpoint in a struggle that has a long

way to go. If, as the End-of-Historyians say, with the demise of socialism, democracy is all there is, then fine, let's get down to it. Moreover, for a radical democrat like Swift, this does not mean simply tinkering with institutions or supplementing the list of human rights. A shift away from what he calls the 'strong market/weak democracy model' requires not only a change in institutions, but also a change in ethos, from the ethos of political consumerism to the ethos of citizenship. This possibility is not something that exists only in the realm of abstract theory, but is something that we see, at least in partial form, in daily life. Swift writes of the 'democratic outbreaks' that occur from time to time around the world, where people 'fly to assemblies' (Rousseau) and start taking matters into their own hands. He argues that there is a 'democratic impulse', a natural, commonsense desire to run one's own individual and community affairs, which exists everywhere, and is different from the 'democratic' ideology preached by the West. Democracy understood in this way can form the basis for understanding and solidarity among peoples who live in very different cultures, but who share the democratic impulse.

One of the attractive things about this book is that it is written in democratic prose. So many democratic theorists make their writing inaccessible to the people they claim to be writing for, by writing in what amounts to code, which can only be decoded by a tiny inner circle of people around the world who have received their initiation in certain postgraduate institutions. How can one believe the democratic aspirations of such blatantly élitist writing? Swift's writing is straightforward and honest, with no escaping into unneeded abstraction or showing off with fashionable jargon. He says what he means, no more. That's how democrats should write.

C Douglas Lummis
Author of *Radical Democracy*

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Introduction

Since the first edition of this *No-Nonsense Guide* appeared in 2002, democracy has taken quite a beating – not least from those who set themselves up as its main defenders. Fundamentalists (of all stripes) obviously place their received ‘truths’ over a mere set of arrangements where the public get to decide what is true and what is not. That they are a continuing threat to democracy is no great surprise. But the response of the political class to this has, with a few notable exceptions, rallied around the garrison state, with its various doctrines of national security, and there has been precious little concern for the freedoms that have been trampled on in the process. We have been confronted by a new and frightening vocabulary – preventive detention, ‘black holes’, extraordinary rendition, coercive interrogation, weapons of mass destruction, warning systems based on various colors (amber alert), high-value suspects, and illegal combatants. Terms and concepts like these seek to justify arbitrary action by those in power to forestall catastrophe. Democratic rights just seem to get in the way.

One of the goals of this book is to make the case for a dual democracy – one that includes both a negative ‘freedom from’ and a positive ‘freedom to’. In societies organized around the market economy, ‘freedom to’ has by and large been expelled from political life and lives on only in the dog-eat-dog world of market activity. By these standards, the job of democracy is to provide freedom from interference with the pursuit and enjoyment of property (in our era particularly corporate property). ‘Freedom to’ in a collective sense (the stuff of strong democracy) is thus in contradiction to freedom from interference in the market. At the end of the first decade of the new millennium the costs of this lack of ‘interference’ in the market – at

minimum, some kind of effective regulation – are all too apparent. In their restless search for profitability, the powerholders of the market have brought the global banking system, housing markets and much else to the brink of collapse. As usual, those who are suffering most are not those who are most responsible. A good time, one would think, to make the case for a more robust democracy of everyday life where people are given a real say over basic economic and political decisions that shape their lives.

But it is the growth of arbitrary police and military power in the open-ended search for ‘freedom from terror’ that has so alarmed civil libertarians, as hard-won political and legal rights have come under increasing threat. It is tempting, in an era when democratic rights seem so fragile, to circle the wagons in defense of a few core freedoms. This, I think, would be a mistake. For, as this *Guide* argues, ‘freedom from’ is inextricably connected to ‘freedom to’. The alienation that leads to violent protest and terror can in some profound sense be laid at the door of a lack of freedom. The frustrations that well up in refugee camps, urban slums, neglected villages, and so many other places without hope, need both freedom from arbitrary interference and freedom to participate in a robust political culture. Both are essential ingredients of a strong democracy.

Richard Swift
Toronto, November 2009

1 What is democracy?

Recent confrontations over issues such as war and corporate globalization have yielded some interesting juxtapositions over the meaning of democracy.

THE IRONY OF these juxtapositions came home to me a number of years ago amid clouds of teargas during the massive demonstrations against the extension of the current North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to include all 34 countries of the Americas but excluding Cuba. The Canadian Government had decided to expropriate the center of Quebec City by slapping up a four-kilometer fence, thereby creating a 'no-go' area to protect 'our' leaders from an unruly public. Over 6,000 police were marshaled from across the country to defend the fence against the thousands who gathered to protest the secret negotiations. The proposed Free Trade Zone of the Americas (FTAA) was designed around the notion of open markets and the rights of corporate investors. It assumed a particular model of 'let-the-market-decide' economic development. This model would squeeze out certain political and economic options – everything from a vibrant public sector to controls of speculative capital would in effect be ruled out. It thus significantly narrowed the democratic policy choices available to people throughout the hemisphere.

The conference agenda was a familiar one – deregulation, privatization, downsizing government. In short, the same agenda that eventually plunged us into the 2008/09 credit crunch and financial meltdown. The 'free' in free trade is the tricky part. Free means democratic doesn't it? Not really. In effect our environmental and social rights were being traded away. No matter what we wanted as democratic citizens, corporate-inspired globalization was what we were going to get.

The battle of Quebec raged for three days. Tens of thousands rallied to say no to corporate globalization and put forward the idea that 'other Americas are possible'. The forces of order filled the Old Town with tear gas at a rate peaking at 30 canisters a minute. Many Quebecois couldn't even stay in their own apartments. Hundreds were injured. Hundreds more were arrested, often on the most trivial of pretexts. The high point of the proceedings from an official point of view was the signing of a 'democracy clause' that committed all the leaders to maintaining elected civilian rule. It also achieved the US aim of isolating Cuba from the proceedings.

But this seemed to those of us on the other side of the fence a rather hollow definition of democracy. How could our leaders be meeting in secret to develop a program that would restrict our democratic rights and possibilities and still call it democracy? Did the word mean anything at all?

Is it okay, as the authorities claim, for politicians with democratic credentials (in other words, they were all in some way elected) to behave in an undemocratic manner? Is it the case, as many politicians believe, that once elected they can act as they choose as long as they aren't caught breaking any laws?

Few of the politicians at the Quebec summit had been elected on a mandate of trading away the rights of their citizens. Trade deals are for the most part not debated at election time. Instead, election campaigns mostly involve the usual set of vague commitments to good government and public order. Some, though, would have promised greater social justice, a narrowing of the gap between the rich and the poor and a cleaner environment. Yet here they all were taking actions that would make these promises difficult, if not impossible, to keep. Was this democracy?

On the other side of the fence were the protesters. The corporate media was by and large hostile to this

What is democracy?

‘unelected mob’. But in a democracy isn’t it the role of citizens to take a vigilant interest in public affairs? When people see their rights stunted and diminished (indeed privatized), isn’t it their democratic duty to rally to defend them? It felt like what the conference organizers really wanted was not active citizens at all. What they wanted was consumers of ‘good news’ who would sit in front of their TV sets and nod enthusiastically at all the limos, photo ops and final communiqués.

We have been treated to other recent examples of our political élite giving us not what we wanted but what they thought we needed. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was the classic example: even with opinion polls and millions on the street saying ‘no’, we got eight years and counting of bloody conflict. It just didn’t seem to matter what we actually wanted.

The events in Quebec City raised for me some serious questions. Is democracy just about elections and voting every few years for someone who will then tell you what is best for you? Or does it have a wider definition? Is there buried in the history of democracy a more radical model in which citizens rule themselves? If so, how have we managed to get so far away from that? And is it possible to get back?

When the demonstrators in Quebec breached the security fence I saw that as a victory for democracy. Those in power saw it as a violation of democratic law and order – an unwelcome interference with the democratic process. The same drama about the meaning of democracy is being rehearsed nearly every time the global political class meets to make decisions behind closed doors. Whether it is in London or Pittsburgh, people on the street are proving increasingly reluctant to surrender their decision-making power to those who supposedly ‘represent’ them. Will it ever be possible to bridge the gap between two such dramatically opposed visions of democracy?

2 Democratic malaise

'The inalienable right to sit on your own front porch in your pajamas, drinking a can of beer and shouting out: "Where else is this possible?"'

Peter Ustinov on US democracy.

While democracy has triumphed as the political system of choice, there are increasing levels of popular disaffection. Voter turnout and other indicators of popular participation are in precipitous decline. The average citizen is feeling estranged from the political process and the more-or-less permanent political class that has come to dominate it. Money and those who control it easily shape the results of democratic decision-making. This is causing a crisis in the meaning of democracy.

IT IS HARD to find anybody these days who doesn't believe in democracy. This was not always the case. Up until the mid-1800s, when movements for democratic rights began to grow in earnest, democracy was generally held to be a dangerous idea associated with barbaric mob rule that would likely destroy all civilized values if it ever caught on. It was only very reluctantly (and after a hard, often violent struggle) that those without property were granted the full rights of citizenship. It was not until well into the 20th century that the franchise was even extended to women. And it was not until after World War Two that the colonized peoples of Asia and Africa were considered 'mature' enough to decide their own fates.

But times have changed. Democracy, or at least its mechanics, are now the common currency of political life. It is meticulously studied in academic journals and university seminars. Journalists and pollsters build their careers sorting through the tea leaves to

ascertain the underlying attitudes and behavior of both voters and the politicians they elect. Almost all public policy debate is couched in terms of what people want/desire/need. Even dictators invoke a mysterious 'will of the people' to explain themselves. Not since 'the divine right of kings' has there been a significant political theory that was based on criteria in which democracy had no place. It would probably be just about possible to identify two openly anti-democratic strands of contemporary political thinking – religious fundamentalism of several stripes and technocratic authoritarianism. However, in both these cases a significant part of the appeal is based on the notion that people need/desire (if they only imperfectly realize it themselves) the values embodied by a community of believers or the application of rigorous science to public policy.

The Obama factor

'The election of Barack Obama is a vindication of democracy.' In 2008/09 this statement has the status of an almost universally acclaimed truth. Not only does the first black President have high approval ratings among US voters but he is a source of fascination and enthusiasm in such traditionally anti-US places as France and Latin America. Even the 'Arab Street', as journalists describe popular opinion in the Middle East, made positive noises after the November 2008 US elections. Obama t-shirts are on sale from Jakarta to Johannesburg. Who would ever have thought that they would see the day when a black man became President of the US? Like his hero Abraham Lincoln, Obama shows that the journey from log cabin to White House is still possible. And it's not just his underdog roots. Obama is promising a new politics. Hope. Change. An end to partisan bickering. It can't get much better than this. Can it? Well, yes and no. Or maybe no and yes.

The first edition of this *No-Nonsense Guide to Democracy* started off with the story of George W Bush's stolen 2000 election and the sad tale of political manipulation in the state of Florida. The Bush Presidency was further tarnished by the stubborn fact that a majority of voters had gone for another candidate. It was a bad news story for democracy but only with seven years' hindsight do we realize just how bad. Giveaways to the rich, speculative bubbles, runaway debt, economic collapse, and an endless war on terrorism that undermines basic democratic values – all are part of the Bush legacy. During his 2004 re-election campaign Bush's Republican team pulled another series of dirty tricks to disenfranchise poor and non-white voters in the swing state of Ohio.¹ Democracy was reeling.

But in 2008 the Obama campaign injected a badly needed breath of fresh air – new voters got involved, hope drove cynicism to the margins, democratic idealism was on the march once more. In these circumstances it seems querulous to dampen people's spirits with skepticism. There is no doubt that, after the Bush years, Obama stands as a much-needed ray of light. But there is a disturbing vagueness about the substance of the Obama campaign slogan of 'Yes We Can!'. Can what?

In its own way the Obama Presidency is as enlightening a snapshot of the causes of the democratic malaise as was the heavy-handed thuggery of Bush and his neocons. Here we have a President with an almost unprecedented mandate for change in circumstances that cry out for radical solutions. From climate degradation to economic collapse to endless cycles of war – we desperately need something different. Little wonder US citizens and those around the world look to Obama as a savior-like figure to lead us through the dark days ahead. But despite his eloquence and undoubted intelligence, how likely is this?

Obama is limited in what he can do by two factors

that consistently sap the promise of democracy in many countries.

- In government he has come to rely on the same group of insiders who helped to create the current problems.
- Outside his administration, meanwhile, the wealthy and powerful and their representatives have geared up to blunt any radical edge that may survive the insiders' efforts.

In his choice of economic cabinet members and advisers Obama has picked a group of men who are acolytes of former Clinton Treasury Secretary and Citibank board member Robert Rubin. Larry Summers, Jason Furman, Andrew Mellon and Timothy Geithner are, to varying degrees, responsible for exposing US banks to the speculative derivatives market by deregulating, thereby removing the protection that surrounded traditional banking. Obama has now put these men in charge of a public bailout that is delivering billions in public funds to banks such as Citibank to cover their speculative losses.

The other group of economic advisers with the ear of the Obama Administration is grouped around high-tech industry. Google CEO Eric Schmidt is a mainstay of Obama's inner circle and an able advocate for a research and development revolution to underwrite Silicon Valley. In foreign and military affairs, Obama advisers include Hillary Clinton, who has solid credentials for supporting US military intervention around the globe, and George Bush-holdover Robert Gates as Defense Secretary, who has a similar pedigree.²

So if the 'change' Obama promises is to occur, it is not likely to be in the areas of greater economic equality or the substance of US imperial policy. The sad fact is that these kinds of key positions are restricted to a couple of thousand potential appointees, whether Republican or Democrat, who differ more in style than in substance. When it comes to the fundamentals

of underwriting corporate America or US military hegemony, dissident views are kept on the margins of power. A similar pool of potential appointees can be found in most 'democratic' political cultures anywhere on the globe. Left or Right, the decision-makers and advisers are drawn from a narrow élite constantly recycled depending on the inclinations of the party in power. The 'continuity' and 'stability' they offer is brought at the price of blunting any push for more radical change.

The constraints facing Obama outside of his administration are also quite significant. Obama was elected with the largest majority in recent US political history and enjoys Democratic majorities in both the House and Senate. Yet from the beginning he has had problems bringing in even minor changes, as 'moderate' Democratic Senators such as Kent Conrad of North Dakota and Mary Landrieu of Maryland are balking at removing tax breaks that Bush brought in for the super-rich (those who make more than \$250,000 a year). As *New Republic* editor Jonathan Chait makes clear: 'Unless you are a high-school student reading this article in your civics course, in which case I am sorry to dispel your illusions, you will not be stunned to learn that the affluent carry a disproportionate political weight with the élites of both parties. So while people who earn more than \$250,000 per year make up a tiny slice of the electorate, they make up a huge chunk of any congressman's friends, acquaintances and fund-raisers.'³ The top three per cent of income-earners provide over a third of US campaign contributions.

Similarly, efforts to remove billions of dollars in controversial agricultural subsidies that hurt poor farmers in the Global South (and could help provide the economic means to bring in a coherent national health program for poor US citizens) are being blocked by Senators like Conrad and Nebraska's Ben

Nelson (making common cause with Republicans) even though they only apply to agribusinesses that take in more than \$500,000 a year. Obama's difficulties in closing the notorious 'extra-legal' US Guantánamo prison complex in Cuba is another case in point. Even one of the most powerful politicians in the world is stuck with a system whose conservative bias and in-built inertia makes significant change difficult.

Examples are not hard to find. Obama's popularity is unlikely to be able to withstand a term of frustrated promises for 'change', particularly against a backdrop of recession fears. Already a know-nothing 'lynch mob' is being mobilized to attack Obama's already watered-down proposals for a national healthcare system in the US – the centerpiece of his program for change. In a situation of political illiteracy, democracy is easily undermined by fantasies of Obama the black communist planning death panels to judge whether ageing US citizens get to live or die. The ingredients are all here for a savior to become just another example of 'politics as usual'. The point is not to deride Obama, who is obviously a politician of intelligence and insight. His pronouncements about the world getting rid of nuclear weapons show real political vision. But despite the media obsession with the personalities and peccadilloes of politicians, these are ultimately not that important. The point is that US democracy (along with most other democratic systems) is sorely blunted as the means of fulfilling the promise of democratic change.

In some times and places – and Salvador Allende's Chile was the classic example for a generation – too great a commitment to democracy runs the risk of brutal military intervention. But most cases are not nearly so clear cut. In other countries the factors limiting democratic change may vary: hostility between different ethnic groups (India, Fiji and many African countries); fear of the military (Thailand, Ethiopia,

Russia); religious fundamentalism (Afghanistan, Iran, United States, Israel); hostility to outsiders such as immigrants (many European countries). These combine with other factors such as political apathy, the abuse of democratic process by entrenched interests, depoliticization through reliance on technocrats and experts, outright corruption and maintaining a cloak of secrecy around governmental affairs. All democratic systems are subject to such influences to some degree.

Democracy triumphant

Yet despite its problems, popular enthusiasm for democracy, particularly where it did not previously exist, remains high. Take the 2009 elections in Indonesia – with 38 political parties competing in simultaneous national, provincial and district elections. In strictly quantitative terms, Indonesian participation must have the country's former military dictator General Suharto rapidly rotating in his grave. Ten years of democracy and the voter abstention rate has only gone up slightly, from 25 per cent to 28 per cent – not bad by the standards of most industrialized countries.

Over the past two decades, it has been dictatorships rather than fragile democracies that have become the falling dominoes of Cold War mythology. Both military dictatorships and communist one-party states have been in dramatic retreat. Whether in the former Soviet republics of Asia or in the 'liberal' communisms of Eastern Europe, autocratic state rule – mired in economic malaise and under intense popular pressure – has folded like a proverbial house of cards. Even the most sinister *bêtes noires* of the Cold War – the Prussian Stalinism of East Germany and the mighty colossus in Moscow backed by the once ferocious Red Army – have been swept away by 'people's power' revolutions. They have been replaced by a series of regimes with claims to at least some kind

Democratic malaise

of political pluralism. In Russia, however, such changes have proved ephemeral, with 'strongman' regimes reasserting themselves. But only the communist states of the Far East and the isolated little island of Cuba remain bastions of one-party communist rule.

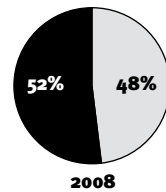
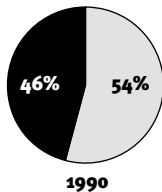
In Latin America the military has been forced back to the barracks in country after country, particularly in the Southern Cone, although countries like Venezuela and Colombia still suffer from significant militarization. The latter remains the last major beneficiary of the kind of US military aid and training programs (part of the seemingly endless War on Drugs) that once helped keep most of the continent under the military thumb. In general, the continent has swung solidly to the Left, with an enthusiasm not just for political democracy but for an economic democracy based on greater equality and social justice.

Bolivia (with an indigenous majority) has its first indigenous President, Evo Morales, while Chile's President, Michelle Bachelet, is not only a woman but

Electoral democracies

Many more countries are considered to be electoral democracies than was the case two decades ago – 119 of 193 countries (62%) in 2008 compared with 76 of 165 countries (46%) in 1990. But the difference is less marked when it comes to showing the percentage of world population living under democratic rule, as the two pie charts below indicate.

■ = Population living under democratic government*



* Any definition of democracy may carry an element of political bias, and that is certainly the case here, as the judgment is made by the US organization Freedom House.

also a former political prisoner of the US-sponsored Pinochet dictatorship. Elsewhere trade unionists, lower-rank soldiers and a playboy Catholic priest have broken the monopoly of a political class made up of professional politicians, lawyers, entrepreneurs and big landowners. Despite enduring difficulties, the continent is in some ways an exciting departure from the 'strong market/weak democracy' model described in this book. But steps towards equality and economic justice have largely not been accompanied by changes in the political sphere that would spread significant decision-making beyond the centralized nation state.

Even in Africa, home of an often bloated and highly militarized post-colonial state, there are some hopeful signs – the defeat of apartheid in South Africa and the first relatively honest elections for many years in the continent's most populous country, Nigeria. It is a promising start, but otherwise genuinely representative government only clings on in a few countries of the continent's west (Ghana, Senegal) and south (Botswana, Mozambique and Malawi). The north, east and Horn regions are still preyed on by political bosses who would rather fight than switch – continuing electoral manipulation in Kenya, military meddling in Madagascar and the ruthless Bashir Government in Sudan are unfortunately not aberrations but business as usual for this part of the world.

In Asia, meanwhile, representative institutions have gained ground from Pakistan to Cambodia, although in many places they remain fragile and under siege from a number of undemocratic sources. In the Arab world, good democratic examples are still notable by their absence, with the credentials of 'guided' democracies like Mubarak's Egypt or Assad's Syria of decidedly questionable merit.

There are many other signs of an emerging international consensus on the value of representative institutions and respect for at least a minimum of

human rights. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are proposing to punish those whose records on things like 'transparency' and 'good governance' are deemed to be inadequate – a far cry from the days when political and economic stability were the flavor of the month and these two erstwhile champions of democracy turned a blind eye to the corpses in the national stadium in Chile or Indonesia's rivers of blood following the military coup of 1967. This marks a major change. The end of Cold War competition should have taken a lot of the ideological heat and hypocritical posturing out of political debate. There should be a welcome clearing of the air and a return to more honest criteria over 'what is' and 'what isn't' democracy.

Democracy after the Cold War

Since the end of the Cold War it is no longer enough to have to justify a set of political arrangements (whether democratic or not) by reference to an undemocratic and sinister 'other' by simply saying 'things could be a lot worse'. Now democracy or its absence must stand naked on its own and be judged for what it is rather than what it isn't. And it is not just the intelligentsia of politics (political scientists, journalists, pundits and so on) who are now doing the judging but also ordinary citizens. The results of their judgments are quite sobering. For if democracy appears on the one hand never stronger, it is also being subjected to a groundswell of dissatisfaction from below.

The indicators of this dissatisfaction are everywhere. The decline in voter participation has spread beyond North America (in the US less than 50 per cent of the electorate bothers to vote and the last Canadian elections witnessed the lowest turnout in the country's history). Most non-compulsory European voter participation has dropped significantly over the past 25 years. A study of 15 western European countries found that

membership of political parties had declined almost a third – from 8.2 per cent of the electorate in the early 1980s to 5.2 per cent by the mid-1990s.⁴

A survey asking the provocative question ‘do politicians care?’ showed a steady decline from the mid-1970s to 2004 amongst Swedes and French people and an overall decline punctuated by erratic spikes of enthusiasm amongst US voters. A multi-country survey showed a growing belief that democracy was the best form of government but less support for the idea that it is a good form of government. In the US there was less support for both notions.⁵

You can almost taste the disappointment with democracy in eastern Europe and the countries that made up the former USSR. The same old figures who ran things under the old communist system are now often back, dressed in democratic clothes. The electorate swings erratically between Left and Right looking for the elusive promise of democracy. The old cynicism from below that marked communist rule is now reborn as a reaction to the new political élite that is consolidating power.

Everywhere it is the economically marginal, those with fewer resources (and arguably more to gain from responsive government) who are absenting themselves from the political process. In the UK, for example, only 2.6 per cent of those who own property are not on the electoral register while 38.2 per cent of those living in furnished rental accommodation have never bothered to register.⁶ Democratic politics is becoming more a means for the relatively privileged to defend what they have, rather than a vehicle for change based on a more equal vision of society.

Frustrated voters

Even where people still bother to cast their ballots they find the political arrangements in place limit their influence and frustrate their intentions. Systems based on the

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