

People Power

The word “democracy” means literally “rule of the people” – or perhaps more loosely, “people power”. Those of us old enough to remember the 1970s comedy *Citizen Smith* will recall that the favourite rallying cry of “Wolfie” Smith, the young Marxist who modelled himself on Che Guevara and was the self-proclaimed leader of the revolutionary Tooting Popular Front, was “Power to the People!”

Wherever Wolfie’s beloved Marxism has taken power, however, the net result has been anything but power to the people. Indeed, the country where ordinary people really have the greatest power, Switzerland, has been for many years at the very bottom of the league of potential Marxist revolutionary hotspots.

Your author is an unashamed fan of Switzerland’s political system – its decentralisation and above all, its use of binding referendums to step in where the country’s elected representatives fall short, thus clipping the wings of excessively ambitious politicians. No fear of a Tony Blair ever becoming Prime Minister in this bastion of Alpine tranquility.

Why, oh why, has this well-run country not thus far inspired other lands to learn from its example – especially given that mistrust of politicians is so widespread – and not just in the UK?

In Germany, admittedly, referendums have a bad name because of Hitler’s misuse of them, intimidating voters and rigging the ballot in a 1934 plebiscite which granted him supreme power. However, this is like saying that all cars are a bad thing because some lunatic caused a motorway pile-up by crashing on the M4 at 120mph.

In this country, we haven’t held referendums in this country

until recently and some people don't like them because they are not part of our historical settlement. Clement Attlee, the Labour Prime Minister from 1945 to 1951, once said, "I could not consent to the introduction into our national life of a device so alien to all our traditions as the referendum."

Things are very different now, however. In 1945, politicians were not treated with contempt nor regarded with anything like the same degree of mistrust as they are today. It's time for a re-think on how we are governed and as part of this process, the role of the referendum has to be given careful consideration. It may not have been historically part of our political system, but attitudes do change over the years – after all, representative democracy, which we now take for granted, didn't have a particularly good press as recently as the 19th Century. The historian Thomas Carlyle believed that democracy was incapable of addressing the problems of poverty and a benign dictatorship was the only answer.

What is more, recent referendums, including both the Scottish independence vote in 2014 and last June's Brexit vote, have generated not only a renewed interest in politics but a desire to have a say in shaping the future direction of our country.

At the moment, all we, the general public, can do is highlight issues of concern, either by writing letters to candidates or addressing questions to them in public meetings. It has been particularly striking how many campaign groups have been providing guidelines for questioning candidates on the particular topics of concern to them, be it freedom, the environment, development on the Green Belt, hunting or whatever. We in CIB have been producing questionnaires on the subject of fisheries and civil liberties – two of our particular concerns.

Pressure does make a difference. We have recently seen the Conservatives climb down on the so-called "dementia tax" because it was so clearly going to be a vote loser. However,

once we get to 8th June, our influence on the political process diminishes dramatically. Whatever the victorious party has or has not included in its manifesto, there is very little we can do hold it to account and stop it breaking its promises once it is in power. We can't kick out MPs who are not up to scratch, so we're stuck with them until the next General Election.

This is very unsatisfactory. After all, these MPs are elected as our representatives. We pay their salaries and what is more, after March 2019, they can no longer hide behind the excuse that such and such a course of action is not possible because of our membership of the European Union.

It is impractical totally to replace representative democracy with direct democracy (i.e., referendums). Ancient Athens operated for a while as a direct democracy, but it was only possible because the franchise was confined to Athenian citizens who could spend quite a bit of time voting while the slave population kept the place ticking over. However, in the internet age, direct democracy has never been easier and Switzerland is proof that introducing a measure of direct democracy, far from being unworkable, destabilising or untenable without large numbers of slaves, results in a free and prosperous country.

Different people had different reason for voting to leave the EU. For me, not only was it a desire to rid my country of control from Brussels; it was the possibilities for change once this was achieved – including a much-needed reboot of the whole process of government in this country, bringing power closer to the people.

Of course, we've got to get out of the EU first and then we've got to elect politicians who are happy to do less and let us – the people – do more, but as a nation, for much of our history we have been up with the front runners when it comes to freedom and calling our rulers to account. Having slammed into

reverse gear in 1973, we have a lot of ground to catch up. The federal Swiss model may not be appropriate in every detail for the UK, but it provides a good starting point for giving much more “power to the people” – in other words, capitalising on the renewed interest in shaping our political future which Brexit has created.

Photo by Wagner T. Cassimiro “Aranha” 