

# Unmasking the State

## Commentary Session 8

Democratic forms first appeared over 6,000 years ago in small societies and city states. The first known citizens' assemblies and decision making by consensus probably appeared in the middle east in the region of Syrian Mesopotamia at the junction of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

The idea of the people's assembly later flourished among many Greek city states along the eastern Mediterranean coasts.

It was in Greece that the word 'democracy' was coined from the Greek 'demos' (people) and 'kratos' (power). Athens was the most powerful city assembly in the ancient world. All male citizens were entitled to debate and vote every ten days on key issues. In the Roman republic, power was divided between the forum and the senate, with the senate holding the whip hand. Dictatorship became the form under the Roman Empire up until its fall during the fifth century.

The assemblies held in Scandinavia and by the Anglo-Saxons in Britain had echoes of the past. But it was the struggle against the medieval state that was to produce the first significant advances in a long march towards what we is now known as liberal democracy. In 1215, King John was forced by barons to sign the Magna Carta under the threat of civil war. This made the monarch subject to the rule of law and set out individual liberties held by 'free men'. Later that century, the first Parliament met at Westminster.

In 1381, a mass rebellion called the Great Rising or Peasants Revolt against oppressive taxes led to the burning of court records, demands for an end to serfdom, the removal of the king's senior officials and law courts. The rising was brutally suppressed.

The first demand for the right to vote came out of the English civil war between Parliament and the Crown that began in 1642. The New Model Army formed by Parliament had delegates to what became an Army Council. In 1647. During lengthy debates in Putney, London, soldier delegates or 'agitators' put forward an Agreement of the People. Written by the Levellers - a radical political group – it proposed an outline for a written constitution. Its revolutionary text stated that sovereign power should reside with the people rather than the king or Parliament. The Agreement laid stress on what its supporters called 'natural rights'.

During the debates, supporters argued that all free men should have the vote. Cromwell and the senior army leadership rejected the Agreement, which was denounced by Parliament. Attempts to gain wider army support for the Agreement were forcibly suppressed. It would take another two centuries for ordinary citizens to win the right to vote.

Meanwhile, the idea of representation as a form of democracy emerged out of the 18th century American revolutionary war against British colonial rule. In a lengthy process following independence, history's first written constitution set out the institutions of state and the voting process. Although the electorate was mostly made up of white property owners plus some freed slaves, voting for Congress and for the presidency became established along with a Supreme Court.

Representative democracy was now established as a principle for others to follow. Two of the constitution's architects, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton, defended the new institutions precisely as agencies more capable of serving the people's interests than the people themselves. Keeping people at arms length was also considered much the safest way to give people access to power.

In early 19th century Britain, the term democracy was regarded as subversive and associated with the French and American revolutions. The Chartists did not agree. They were the first working class mass movement anywhere in the world. Their Six Points published in 1838 were for annual parliaments, universal manhood suffrage, payment of MPs, secret ballot, equal electoral districts and abolition of property qualifications for MPs. It sounds a modest set of demands now, but at the time it filled the ruling class with fear.

Millions of people were swept up in petitions, strikes, meetings, conventions, national organisation and insurrections in a direct challenge to the state. The first major rally took place in Glasgow when tens of thousands reportedly marched. In September 1838 the authorities were shocked when an estimated 300,000 assembled at Kersal Moor near Manchester. "For Children and Wife we'll War to the Knife", and "Bread and Revolution" were typical slogans carried by Chartists.

Early in 1839, the Convention of the Industrious Classes met in London before moving to Birmingham in May. Delegates had been elected by mass meetings in the months before and many workers considered the Convention an expression of the coming government of workers. The Convention had to decide what to do in the event that Parliament rejected the petition. Delegates adopted the formula of "peaceably if we may, forcibly if we must". A manifesto of "ulterior measures" included a month's general strike, a resort to arms and a trade boycott. That year 4,000 armed Chartists – who had trained and drilled in secret - marched on Newport, Wales, in a bid to forcibly impose their demands but were thwarted.

The petition of 1842 attracted an amazing 3,317,702 signatures and a massive strike wave broke out in northern England and western Scotland after MPs once more rejected the petition. Some Chartists hoped that a revolution might be built from this movement. But the state, at first taken aback by the developments, now deployed its new-found powers. Troops broke up meetings, killing four at Preston and the strike collapsed after an heroic two months of struggle. In 1848, galvanised by the revolution in France, the Chartist movement made a final attempt to win its demands through a petition backed by a demonstration of over 200,000 at Kennington, across the river from Westminster. Once more the petition was rejected and Chartism passed its high point.

Once the capitalist state felt confident about its grip on power, the right to vote was conceded starting in 1867. And by 1884 most male workers were enfranchised. Women over 30 had to wait until 1918 and younger women until 1929. The foundations for what is called liberal democracy had been laid. Conflict would continue unabated as workers pressed for social rights. But essentially, the democratic, representative side remains unchanged, at least in form.

Moving on to the features – and not necessarily the virtues - of liberal democracy, you can see that these include more than the vote. There is the rule of law already mentioned, rights to free speech and to publish and to organise. Generally, there is a functioning civil society outside of the state with its own bodies like, for example, the National Trust. Most

significantly, there is a privately-owned and controlled economic system, also known as capitalism. The two have developed in conflict with each other through the centuries.

So what do you get for your money? You get the opportunity to vote in a government and remove one at the same time.

This form of representation gives a certain indirect access to power via a government of your choice. For that group of voters who voted another way, there is no effective access to power – they are disenfranchised. For example, In 2019, the Tories won a three-figure majority with the votes of just 29% of the total electorate. In the UK, with its first-past-the-post voting system, people don't always get what they vote for. On occasions, parties winning the popular vote or the largest share of the vote have failed to secure a majority in Parliament, for example.

Theoretically, a liberal democracy should also give you the capacity to pressure for and even obtain significant social reforms. This claim had a certain truth to it in the post-World War Two period up until the early 1970s. We can discuss in the next session how this route has become a bit of a cul-de-sac in the neoliberal period, when the naked rule of the markets became the central feature of the political process.

So we know what we can expect from a liberal democracy in its most ideal form. But what are the limitations, even with the right to vote and political representation? I've summarised them on this slide. You may be consulted from time to time, but decision-making is out of your hands. Locally, people can object in big numbers to say a new civic centre while key services are starved of resources, or against a library closure. Ultimately, the decision lies with a group of councillors and perhaps their connection with local developers. Polls show that a big majority want action on climate change but, as you know, that doesn't translate into action. Most of Scotland, for example, favour the removal of nuclear weapons from their country. The Westminster government holds the whip hand and the mainstream parties are in favour of keeping nuclear submarine bases in Scotland.

We all know that our rights are not permanent. For example, trade unions had unfettered rights to strike and picket until the Thatcher government came to power in 1979. In the next few years, these rights were whittled away and replaced by severe restrictions still in force today. Rights to demonstrate are being reduced by new legislation going through Parliament. Voter ID will undoubtedly reduce turnout at elections while the right to free university education established in the post-war period became the right to student loans to pay for tuition fees.

Setting out to change the nature of the state is simply not on the agenda in a liberal democracy. Mainstream parties, the media, the courts and the police, MI5 and other power institutions start from the assumption that the present system is the only legitimate one.

We saw in the previous session on hegemony how reinforcing the message about various aspects of the status quo plays a key role in achieving support for the system.

As for that crucial area – the economy – that lies outside of the political process, there is no democracy in any meaningful sense. A similar point is made by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis in their book 'Democracy and Capitalism'. They assert that democratic institutions in major capitalist countries are often what they call "mere ornaments" which are "proudly displayed to visitors, and admired by all, but used sparingly". They add that the places where

things really get done – in such core institutions as families, armies, factories and offices – have been anything but democratic.”

To sum up, the democratic process within liberal capitalism is fragile and relative. Capitalism can function without democracy, as it does in many countries around the world. In the pre-war period, Nazi Germany in particular demonstrated that big business can flourish within a fascist state. In the next session we will discuss how liberal democracy hangs by a thread on every continent. Then will discuss how we protect our rights and also develop a strategy to deepen democracy in new ways throughout society.