Brexit and Democracy

By Andy Ross

A democratic political system is a formalised way of enacting the will of the people. Since no individual politician can credibly claim to know the will of the people directly, the system forms a snapshot of that will by collecting the votes of the people and subjecting them to some simple procedure, such as counting, to assemble a pixelated image.

We can safely leave the technicalities of the pixelation process and the production of a snapshot to the political experts. Experience of many systems over many years has reduced the business, if not to an exact science, at least to a fine art. What remains is to evaluate the meaning and the importance of the portrait of the people that results.

Ask a stupid question, get a stupid answer: This piece of folk wisdom constrains the value of the individual pixels that depict the will of the people. A simple yes-no question generates black or white pixels from which only a grainy outline image can be extracted. On the other hand, a nuanced question will mean different things to different people.

Whatever the outcome, the paramount risk in a democratic system is that the image is taken as the reality. However flawed, the portrait becomes an icon, a sacred symbol toward which politicians must perform holy rites to appease their voters. The risk is that the people, thus venerated, develop an inflated sense of their own importance.

Traditional religion, for all its flaws, drummed humility into its followers, and a traditional monarchy drummed humility into its subjects. But a modern democracy invites its voters, or at least those of them who are on the winning side in a division, to imagine their sovereign will is supreme. This used to be condemned as the Christian sin of pride.

Self-will, in all its forms, is a dangerous spur to action. The momentary self of an individual person may prompt overindulgence of a vice such as gluttony or lechery, but the larger shared sense of self of an organised group of people, as in a political movement, can lead to catastrophic outcomes. History is awash with cautionary examples.

For this reason, in modern times, the nation states of Europe have organised themselves into a superordinate body, the European Union, that contains and shapes the sovereignty of its members and preserves a modicum of order between its peoples. Similarly, in earlier times, the different peoples on the British Isles organised themselves into the United Kingdom. In both cases, the aim was to limit and channel the expression of political self-will toward higher values or virtues that might better serve the common interest.

In recent years, the UK has found itself on a collision course with the EU. The titanic parliamentary juggernaut of the UK establishment, trailing a historic wake of martial and imperial glory, is now grinding disastrously against the massive continental iceberg into which the formerly fractious nations of Europe have frozen their animosities. The predicted outcome toward which all sober expectation converges is that the EU, for all its obvious flaws and weaknesses, will be less damaged by the collision than will the UK.

The bigger picture is worth pondering. The victory of democracy in 1945 led experts to conclude that politicians heeding the popular will, as expressed in democratic elections and parliaments, were stronger than dictators in more authoritarian systems who failed to carry the people with them on their political adventures. That conclusion has been allowed to decay in recent years into a lazy acceptance that populism, in which demagogues uphold relatively wild expressions of popular will for opportunistic reasons, is a valid way to continue the democratic tradition.

In Ancient Greek philosophy, the decay of democracy into populism was a precursor to tyranny: A populist leader channels the popular will by means that short-circuit the checks and balances of the usual democratic processes until that leader finally usurps the popular will and rules as a tyrant. For some observers, President Trump in America illustrates the early stages of this process. For others, the emergence across Europe, including Russia, of popular and increasingly authoritarian leaders reveals the same trend.

In the wider sweep of politics, it is worth remembering that democracy is a means, not an end. Individual people will this or that end in ways that can only be deconflicted in a system that balances the conflicting ends against each other, and democracy has proved to be a simple and robust mechanism to establish and deliver that balance. By contrast, an authoritarian system will prioritise one set of ends above all others and force the losers to swallow their pride and accept defeat, if not total ruin.

Populists on the path to tyranny tend to take a crudely pixelated image of the popular will and weaponise it against all opposition. Soon enough, the image becomes an abstract icon, like a cross on the shield of a crusader, and the people are praised in name only under the tyrant's rule. This is the road the Bolsheviks took in Soviet Russia when they established the dictatorship of the proletariat, first under Lenin and then under Stalin, before proceeding to ruin old Europe.

Applied to the collision between the UK and the EU, the drift from democracy to populism is evident in the aggressive sacralisation of the 17.4 million votes for the Leave cause in the 2016 referendum. That cartoon snapshot of the will of the people may be upheld as iconic, but like the 2005 Danish cartoon of Muhammad it serves more to divide than unite us. Times change, and reasonable people are not too proud to change their opinions to reflect new facts.

More specifically, UK parliamentarians have acted in genuflection to the 2016 icon without due appreciation of the need for a better portrait of the people. The 2017 general election offered no royal road for voters disaffected by the icon and thus deepened their disaffection. The obvious solution is to commission a new portrait.

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