

Editorial

DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION, CONSENSUS AND VIOLENCE

Never in reply to the question, to what country you belong, say you are an Athenian or a Corinthian, but that you are a citizen of the world.

Epictetus AD 55

Ranking among the more salient hallmarks that characterise a society which has reached the higher echelons of civilization and advanced political maturity must surely be the unimpeded ability of the community at large to flex its democratic power, and the mastery of the art of decision-making via means of head-to-head negotiations and discussion. Such principles have integrally engrained in them the acceptance by the majority that often there are differing points of view regarding solutions to problems, and that these are to be listened to and at least respected for what they are. In *The Republic*,¹ Plato's dramatic voice, Socrates, says of democracy that it creates a city 'full of freedom and frankness – a man may say and do what he likes . . . here freedom is, the individual is clearly able to order for himself his own life as he pleases'. The 'well-ordered state' has a ruling government characterised by 'the rule of the few', with the ruling elite acting as 'guardians' of the state by force of their rigorous 'virtue'. The characteristics of the leadership are their superior, if not superlative, knowledge, wisdom, competence, talent and ability. Furthermore, Plato has Socrates enunciate that the purpose of a state 'is not the disproportionate happiness of any one class, but the greatest happiness of the whole'.

To Aristotle the family is a 'domestic community' with a base in the family home, and the state is the 'political community' – though both should have a collective common purpose. Inherent in these tenets is the assumption that those in the minority should be able to express these opinions by writing and speaking freely about them, and, if needs be, by demonstrating publicly and protesting peacefully to further raise general awareness. A nation that is able to accept potential disagreement with principles and views allegedly or genuinely held by the majority, is a nation that has achieved civic maturity. In sharp contrast, the suppression of free thought and speech by media censorship and individual repression, and the use of violence to dampen down and crush peaceful protest, characterises a weak government. In the early 1990s, the Cambridge-educated Lee Kuan Yew, former Prime Minister of Singapore, argued against such 'Western values'. In several speeches and articles he castigated the West's 'obsession' with individualistic and minority viewpoints which, he argued, only led to self-indulgence, disrespect for authority, political disorder and ultimately the disintegration of society.

The civilised world should be able to accept, respect and debate such opposing concepts. On the other side of the coin, the use of unprovoked and irresponsible violence in any form, but particularly if waged in a planned and carefully orchestrated format, as a method of expressing disagreement, is no more than an admission by the minority

of their degeneration into a rabble. What may have been a totally legitimate and appropriate protest is thus transformed into a *mêlée* that is unable to convince by logical argument, and articulate and enunciate its differences with the common-held compromise.

An analysis in the light of the goings-on at the two international meetings held simultaneously during July, one in Italy and the other in Germany, reveals a contrasting picture. The meeting held in Genoa was of the respective heads of state of the so-called G8 wealthier nations and Russia. They had once more come together, as they regularly do, in what to some is a provoking degree of splendour and opulence, surrounded by tight security. In this instance they were there to discuss how the Third World and poorer countries can be best aided, how a universal campaign against AIDS could be better coordinated and financed, and in which ways it would be possible for existing international financial debts to be written off rather than repaid. The other meeting that convened in Bonn brought together environmentally minded nations, worried about the continued depredation and collective mismanaged use of natural resources, in yet a further attempt to seek common ground through which to control such vital matters as emission of carbon dioxide, global warming, industrial pollution and climactic change.

In Genoa, protesters claiming to have views about the adverse impact of globalisation took over the streets; they systematically looted shops and private houses, torched cars and offices and fought pitched battles with the forces of order. This general violence unfortunately incited retaliatory violence by those entrusted with the maintenance of order. Chaos-bred disorder breeds more chaos and disorder. The communications that went on between the world leaders in the Palazzo Ducale and the dialogue that took place between the highest representatives of the richest nations were diluted, if not almost completely overshadowed. The interest of the world's media seemed to be exclusively focussed on the violent street outbursts. The protesters achieved nothing, and the achievements in the interviews with, and the communiqués of, the delegates went largely unnoticed.

In Bonn, views which were often diametrically opposed and emanating from different nations, were bandied around and argued, blended and inter-moulded, and they were discussed until, almost literally, the speakers were blue in the face, and collapsing from exhaustion and lack of sleep. No violence and no disorder occurred, and the deliberations eventually became reconciled at the eleventh hour into a compromise. A consensus was reached with some potential for amelioration of the *status quo*. Many argued that what was finally agreed was a tame, watered-down and ineffectual please-all compromise – perhaps, but it was also an important, initial step achieved by painstaking and peaceful joint negotiations. Every long journey starts from a small step in the right direction.

Such an example may lead to a reflection on whether there is ever scope and sufficient reason to resort to violence. To many, violence is best considered as an atavistic and unwanted trait, retained from past evolutionary times when humans formed part of the lower order of the animal kingdom; a resort to violence as a means of settling disputes and disagreements refutes higher intellectual properties and is equivalent to the abrogation of logic and debate. However, in this context the concept of the 'just war' is often bandied around as the only solution to certain critical, and otherwise insurmountable, problems. The condonable reliance on violence as a last resort was promulgated from the time of Augustine of Hippo; in the many centuries that followed, in its various nuances and degrees, it has become acceptable as a concept that, many feel, is still worth endorsing. Righteous anger is an acceptable, and perhaps an even laudable emotion, but should its spillover, and its marshalling and channelling into flagrant violence towards others and their property, be endorsed?

This non-belligerent and violence-abhorring attitude has been described at times as the ethos held by those to be branded as cowards and wimps, white-feathered and shunned as pariahs of society. However, as proven again and again by many great world statesmen and leaders, this philosophy forms the backbone of the way of life of many eminent men and women, and, paradoxically, is one to be proud of. Taking this to its ultimate expression, the numerous covert conflicts and blatant wars that are currently visited on the world and are being waged on every continent are no more than expressions of mayhem-generating despair, intellectual bankruptcy and unprincipled emotions. Although a winner may eventually be declared in an armed encounter, most such conflicts are no more than pyrrhic victories, with the victors left prostrated by the cost of the war-making and bankrupted in terms of loss of young lives and destruction, for which money has to be found to recompense, rebuild and restructure. Talking, and talking again, for as long as it takes, must surely always be a substitute for the discharge of guns and the launching of rockets, the taking of life and wholesale destruction.

The onus for decision-making and leading in discussion is delegated to leaders who in a democratic society have to be duly elected by the majority of those whom they are meant to represent. A basic human right for every citizen that has reached the 'age of reason' is to be able to express their preference by freely choosing from those who have put themselves forward for this task. The universal right of suffrage is yet another battle that is still being waged in some countries and it is a matter that has engendered its own level of violence and mortality. It is therefore amazing and numbing that those who have, through no action of their own, acquired such rights choose not to exercise them. Only 59% of the potential electorate in Britain turned out to vote in the last general election: a low turnout that has not been seen for most of the last century. A civic right that was hard earned, literally by blood, sweat and tears, is randomly discarded and left unexercised by many with this vested obligation; this right should also be duty. The fatalistic, cynical and perhaps statistically untenable view is the commonly held one that no matter what the turnout at the polls, a country will always end up with the government that it deserves.

Whoever wins an election will relegate the other political contenders into the opposition. An amazing and

somewhat disconcerting trait is that those in government will invariably attempt to deride and score points off their opposition, whether these are deserved or otherwise, and *vice versa* from the opposite corner. If one political camp believes that a particular scheme is useful and workable, the opposing political side will surely find ways of discrediting this policy and proposing an alternative one. If there is more than one substantial party in opposition, then each of these will in turn come out with their own solution to a particular problem which will inherently disagree with and discredit the other side. Members of different political parties do not seem to be capable of seeing eye-to-eye even on basic principles. This is also the case on matters of major import which affect the population at large – even on big issues such as education, health provision, law and order.

One can rely on the fact that a polarisation of views is always to be found, and political problem-solving quite frequently does not relate to logic but rather to entrenched political dogma. However, it often appears to those with no particular political axe to grind – and they frequently happen to form the majority – that if politicians can be urged to listen to one other, an amalgam of their views makes more practical sense; such a compromised solution, if arrived at by constructive mutual discussion, may turn out to be more appropriate than either of the original two solutions when considered individually. Political posturing and party allegiances to principles may boost egos, but may not be what is best for a nation.

Amazingly, however, a solution that somehow springs out in every major crisis or national catastrophe is the formation of a committee, council or even a parliament, of general national unity. As part of crisis management, all join arms and work together, pooling different ideas and ideologies for the good of the whole – this often works, and works well. If the political opposition can offer solutions and different ways of resolving a problem, should it take a crisis – such as a war, or worse – for political heads to be knocked together? Should not party rhetoric and partisan shadowboxing be put to one side in the interest of the community at large and issues that really matter?

In matters of health, it is difficult to see how in peacetime and in the absence of catastrophes there could be such a substantial divergence of political opinions in terms of health provision. It is surely the case that there is a generally agreed shopping list of health-generated demands. Patients need treatment whosoever is in government and this should be made available within a reasonable time after symptom presentation. Hospitals have to function effectively and within their means. A health budget has to be found from the public purse, allocated according to regional requirements and prudently managed. A demand-led service has to be provided and every effort made to keep pace with advances, particularly in the preventative field. This has to be further underpinned by a stratagem for provision of an infrastructure of health care in the community and for medical education. Should all this not be a sufficiently suitable and important impetus for a unified and concerted political approach?

A principle that seems to be emerging in the field of the worldwide continuing provision of energy requirements is the concept of sustainability. In simple terms, attempts are being made to ensure that requirements for power and energy can still be met when the bonanza of fossil fuels

ends, yet also ensuring that newer sources are renewable and capable of continuing to sustain the energy requirements for the decades to come. This same concept may also have an application in plans for the provision of health. It is said that the world's population is still growing, and will go on growing for several more decades; at the same time it is also ageing, and at a more rapid rate than was formerly calculated. The scope of adequate medical provision and the targets for health care will have to keep changing to accommodate these anticipated demographic alterations: one eye is always to be fixed on the future.

Only someone who submits to the authority of the universal order and of creation, who values the right to be party of it and a participant in it, can generally value himself and his neighbours and thus honour their right as well.

Vasclav Havel, Czech Republic – July 4th 1994

REFERENCES

- ¹ Plato. *The Republic*. Lee HDP, translator. 2nd ed. London: Penguin Books, 1970.