

## Democracy, Bernard? It must be stopped

Permanent secretary Sir Humphrey Appleby, of *Yes Minister*, was a master of political intrigue. In a letter written to his protégé Bernard Woolley - recently discovered by **Antony Jay** and **Jonathan Lynn** - he gives his telling insights into the workings of British government

### My dear Bernard

First, let me congratulate you on your promotion. As a senior permanent secretary, you are now at the very heart of the governing class. You will, however, forgive me if I confess that my pleasure at your promotion is tinged with a certain anxiety. Your loyalty and industry are, of course, beyond doubt, but I am less convinced that you truly understand the nature of the battle in which you are now one of the generals. I have heard you use phrases such as, "Surely in a democratic society..." and "The people have a right..." which suggest that you do not really know your enemy.

Let us be clear about this: you are engaged in an unending war against the most subversive and destructive force of modern times. That force is "democracy". It is based on the fallacious belief that the will of the people should determine the behaviour of governments. Obviously, as you and I know, it is only the governing class who can decide how the country should be governed. Our fundamental objective, therefore, is to make sure that democracy does not interfere with the sound and responsible conduct of the nation's affairs. The purpose of this letter is to remind you of the means by which, over the years, we have been able to achieve this.

I do not need to tell you that the governing class is today something very different from the aristocracy and landed gentry who discharged the duty so capably in the 18th and 19th centuries. It now includes local councillors, trade union leaders, quango members, regulatory bodies, pressure groups, magistrates, tribunals, advisory committees, government agencies, statutory commissions and, of course, members of both houses of Parliament and the political parties that support them. And, behind all of them, the senior public officials who make the system work.

Only the paranoid and the terminally naive believe the governing class has a common agenda, shared principles or unifying beliefs: it is riven with faction, discord and enmity. Their only common interest is to ensure that the vast ignorant mass of the electorate is not allowed an inappropriate influence over the decisions taken on their behalf.

*Most of the governing class are regrettably obsessed with advancing their own interests. Only a few of us, notably the senior officials in central government, are dedicated to protecting and extending the system which enables them to do so without interference from the forces of democratic barbarism. Your new eminence brings with it a heavy responsibility.*

Reflect for a moment on a few of the disasters that rampant democracy would bring in its train: our current liberal practices such as the abolition of the death penalty, playing down the issues of asylum seekers and immigrants, restoring mental patients to the community, maximising the use of resources with mixed wards in hospitals and early release for criminals whose acts of violence reflect only their deprived upbringing - all these would be reversed overnight.

Some ghastly scheme such as educational vouchers would transfer control of education from teachers and properly qualified educationalists, who know what is best for children, to parents, who know little or nothing about it. We would see an end to the civilised contributions made by an enlightened government to support opera, ballet, classical theatre, art galleries and creative - if uncommercial - films. The civilised, 26-week years of Oxford and Cambridge would be extended to create the academic equivalent of intensive farming. And you need not think that the salaries, inflation-proofed pensions and honours justly awarded to senior officials in the Civil Service would survive the democratic carnage.

*This is, need I say, only a small sample of the horrors we would face if Britain had the misfortune to become a true democracy. Of course, all these measures have their advocates within the governing class, but its members, happily, do not push their proposals to the point that would threaten the system that supplies their own private health care, their children's private education, their "official" overseas trips, their leafy suburban homes, their expense allowances, their tax benefits, their pension schemes or their comfortable salaries.*

I would hope that, by now, you have come to understand the basic principle of neutralising democratic power: you leave the democratic process untouched.

The crass foreign dictators who suspend parliaments, execute government ministers, jail MPs and impose military dictatorships and police states rarely have any enduring success.

It is vital to preserve and indeed dignify the forms, processes, traditions and rituals of democratic government. General and local elections, political parties, parliament. Cabinets and shadow cabinets, seals of office, Hansard, the State Opening, Black Rod, the Queen's Speech, the Speaker's chair - all these must be religiously preserved and stoutly defended.

*We never try to stamp out democracy; we simply hollow it out from within, like a Hallowe'en pumpkin, light a candle to its memory, carve a smile on its face, and everyone is happy. You may think it no accident that in the word democracy, the stress is on "mock".*

Democracy is at its most formidable when many small groups of people have power to collect and spend taxes and manage their own affairs without reference to a higher and more enlightened authority. The London Borough of Wandsworth has a larger population than Iceland, and it has been the triumph of our system to ensure that it has less than point one per cent of Iceland's independent authority.

So, the first two rules for neutralising democracy are:

**1. Centralise revenue.** The governing class cannot fulfil its responsibilities without money. We, therefore, have to collect as much money as we can in the centre. In fact, we have done this with increasing effect over the years, with three happy results.

The first is that we can ensure that money is not spent irresponsibly by local communities. By taking 80 or 90 per cent of the money they need in central taxes, we can then return it to them for purposes of which we approve. If they kept it for themselves, heaven knows what they might spend it on.

The second happy result is that the larger the sum, the harder it is to scrutinise. The £6,000 or so spent by a rural parish council is transparent and intelligible, and subjected to analysis in distressing detail. By contrast, the three or four hundred billion of central government revenue is pleasantly incomprehensible, and leaves agreeably large sums for purposes which the common people would not approve if it were left to them. It also means that a saving of £1 million can be dismissed as 0.0000003 of annual expenditure and not worth bothering with, whereas it can make a lot of difference to the budget of *Fidelio* at Covent Garden.

The third result is that the more the government spends, the more people and organisations are dependent on its bounty, and the less likely they are to make trouble.

**2. Centralise authority.** It goes without saying that if Britain is to remain a country of civilised values, the masses cannot be trusted with many decisions of importance. Local government must be allowed to take decisions, but we have to ensure that they are trivial.

Meanwhile, we must increase the volume of laws made centrally. We have an enviable record of legislation growth, with hardly any laws being repealed, which it is now your duty to extend. If

you are under pressure to provide statistics showing your zeal in deregulation, you will find many laws concerning jute processing and similar extinct industries which can be repealed without too much harm. We also ensure that, where local government has authority to act independently, there is an appropriate structure of scrutiny, review and appeal to control its excesses. I am sure you will want to protect this.

You will also want to ensure that every Bill contains wide enabling powers, so that unpopular provisions can be brought in later as statutory instruments which MPs rarely read and virtually never debate. You should be able to achieve three or four thousand of these in a good year.

**3. Harness the Prime Minister.** The rest of the rules flow from the first two, and this is the most important of them. Happily, it presents no problem. Governments today are even more hostile to democracy than we are, though for a different reason. They come to power on a tide of promises and expectations which are never capable of realisation, but which have secured for them the exquisite luxuries of office, fame and power which they are desperate to retain.

It is not hard to convince the Prime Minister that, to fulfil the expectations, he needs to acquire more revenues and more powers. His object in securing this is, of course, only to hold on to office, not to reinforce the position of the governing class. But the effect is the same. You will remember from our days with Mr Hacker that in any conflict between the wishes of the people and the preservation of his job, there was never any doubt of the outcome.

**4. Insulate the Cabinet.** This involves more than just our standard technique of keeping ministers too busy to make a nuisance of themselves. They must be kept, as far as possible, well away from any contact with the sweaty multitude.

This means avoiding public transport by use of private cars, avoiding the National Health Service by private health care, avoiding sink schools by living in affluent suburbs or by private education, travelling business class or in private planes, staying in first class hotels, and always having security staff to usher them through crowded concourses.

Of course, they will affect to resist this at first, but when we point out the security risk, the tragic loss that their departure would entail, the enormous value of the time of people so important, and the possible political embarrassment of being caught on camera in confrontation with protesters, they acquiesce with gratifying rapidity.

**5. Enlarge constituencies.** Our present electoral system derives from the 1832 Reform Act. It was a very dangerous system. The average number of voters in a constituency was only about 1,200, which meant that an MP could personally know virtually all of them. This, in turn, meant that if he was liked and respected locally, he would be re-elected, even if he disobeyed the whips and voted in accordance with the demands of his constituents and his conscience rather than the instructions of his party. This severely weakened the Prime Minister's control on which the system depends.

But, since then, we have contrived, in the name of democracy, to increase constituency sizes to 50,000 or 60,000, so that no MP can be elected on voters' personal knowledge of him. They vote for the party, and if the party does not endorse him, he will not be elected. His job, therefore, depends on the Prime Minister's approval and not on the respect of his constituents; a splendid aid to discipline.

Equally, we have increased the typical urban constituency ward to about 25,000, with some four councillors. Since one councillor to 6,000 people might have led to an undesirable independence

of thought and action, we have arranged matters so that a group of four councillors jointly represent the whole ward, so that householders are unlikely even to know the name of their democratic representative.

They, therefore, vote (the few who take the trouble) according to their party preferences, thus reinforcing the hold of the national parties on local government. A councillor tempted to rebel will think of his hopes for an invitation to the Buckingham Palace garden party and remember where his duty lies, as will the party worker whose efforts are inspired by the hope that the party will one day fix his OBE.

**6. Overpay MPs.** Even when MPs depend on the party machine for re-selection and re-election, some are occasionally tempted to step out of line. This risk can be significantly reduced if rebellion means not only loss of party support but also significant loss of income. Few will risk forfeiting the now generous emoluments and allowances of an MP and reverting to the humble salary of a school teacher, social worker or minor trade union official simply on a point of democratic principle. It is, therefore, our duty to encourage all increases in MPs' pay - not least because it improves the case for a rise in our own somewhat modest remuneration.

**7. Appointments, not elections.** Parliament, of course, has to be elected, but, as we have seen, this causes little problem so long as the government maintains its firm central control of the MPs. The system, however, is deeply flawed: it can substitute craven capitulation to the ignorant and irresponsible mob for sensible control by a cultivated and experienced elite.

It is our duty to resist this with all our strength. The preservation of civilised values in a country of some 60 million people cannot be entirely discharged by a few of us in Whitehall: much of the task has to be delegated to people such as BBC governors, the ITC, the Arts Council, the Commission for Ancient Monuments, National Heritage, the Fine Arts Commission, magistrates, the Bank of England and a host of authorities, commissions, councils, tribunals, regulatory bodies, agencies, working parties, advisory committees and quangos of every description.

The only sensible way to fill all these posts is by government appointment, so that proper care can be exercised in their selection and so that the incumbents, when chosen, will know to whom they owe their new eminence, while those hoping for such posts (as with honours and peerages) can be trusted to behave responsibly in the hope of favours to come.

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**8. Permanent officials, rotating ministers.** The task of preserving a cultured and enlightened nation requires continuity. That continuity must rest with those of us who know what we are fighting for and fighting against. It cannot possibly be entrusted to politicians. We have, therefore, built an excellent system of a few transient amateur ministers who are coached, informed, guided and supported by a large department of permanent, experienced officials who enable them to take the correct decisions.

You have now served our department for 30 years; your present minister has held his job for 10 weeks and cannot, on average, expect to be there for more than another 12 or 18 months if he has any ability. If not, there is no problem. You will, therefore, I am sure, be able to prevent him making any foolish popular decisions before the music stops and he scrambles desperately for an empty chair.

Furthermore, our electoral system ensures that when the populace becomes dissatisfied with the system, they can be deluded into thinking they are changing it by replacing one lot of inexperienced amateurs with another, leaving the professionals to continue uninterrupted, and relieved of the burden of the few ministers who were starting to understand their job. The new arrivals can quickly be helped to realise that the purpose of government is not to carry out the will of the electorate, but simply to secure its consent to the measures proposed by its betters.

**9. The government as employer.** "Public ignorance is our ally".

Any government must employ staff, if only in the Armed Services, the police, the judiciary, the Diplomatic Service and the Exchequer. But those basic functions on their own cannot justify the level of taxation and degree of control that we need to fulfil our historic function. We, therefore, need to increase the number of public employees whenever the opportunity presents itself.



**The 'mock' in democracy: Bernard, Jim Hacker and Humphrey**

There are three reasons for this: it increases the volume of government revenue, it extends the area of government control, and it enlarges the pool of voters who have an interest in preserving the system that employs them.

**10. Secrecy.** One of our greatest allies is public ignorance. It is, therefore, imperative that the minimum amount of information be disclosed to the press, parliament and the public. Our success is based on the principle that no information should be disclosed unless there is a good reason why it should be.

From time to time, opposition parties press for a freedom of information Act, but oppositions become governments and it does not take long for a government to discover that real freedom of information would make their job impossible. It is, however, a good idea to pass the odd freedom of information Act, so long as its provisions do not actually free up any important sensitive information. It is significant that the only party that has consistently argued for real freedom of information has not held office since 1915.

I am sure, my dear Bernard, that, in a general way, you understand the principle, but in your new seniority you need also to understand the mechanisms, which I hope the above 10 points may help to clarify for you. The purely negative policy of defending what we have already achieved is not enough. We cannot say we shall never lose the battle against the malign forces of democracy since, as you and I have learnt over the years, in politics and government the word "never" does not take the future tense.

It is, therefore, essential to work towards devices which will further reduce the danger of democratic interference with sound government. I regret that I was not able to achieve any of these before my retirement, but I hope that I am passing the torch on to a safe pair of hands.

Beyond this, I can only point you towards the breathtaking achievements of our colleagues in Brussels. To be frank, I do not see any prospect of our rivalling them.

- Their commissioners, like our permanent secretaries, do not have to endure the ignominy of grubbing votes from the plebs, and, unlike us, do not have to pretend to be subservient to a political master.
- Being answerable to 15 ministers from different countries, most of whom are hostile to each other, and would be even more hostile if they could understand each other's languages, gives them almost complete independence of action. They have also ensured that only the Commission can bring forward legislation, thus avoiding the tedious, irritating and ill-informed ministerial scrutiny we have to endure drafting Bills.
- And since the European electorate speaks so many different languages, it is impossible for genuine European political parties to form, thereby making any serious danger of democracy quite inconceivable.

Obviously, success on that scale is out of our reach, but we can look on Brussels as a guiding star which we must follow, even if we know we cannot land on it.

So, my dear Bernard, let me end by repeating my congratulations on your promotion to the highest office in the noblest calling open to a citizen of our great civilised nation. Its continued greatness and civilisation are now in your hands. I know I can trust you to keep the world safe from democracy.

**Humphrey**