

# Representative Democracy

**David Berry**

Perhaps the most popular defence of representative democracy, within a capitalist economic framework, is that it is a system designed and able to correct inefficiencies and wrongdoing that become publicly known. Defenders of the system acknowledge the fact that representative democracy isn't perfect and indeed can be brutal, particularly the reality that under such regimes great swathes of economic inequality exists alongside real political power that lay in the control of political classes more often than not tied umbilical-like to big business.

Francis Fukuyama once wrote of the *End of History*, a book celebrating both the collapse of Stalinism in the former USSR and the victorious emergence of representative democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. To make his point Fukuyama based the end of history on Marx's concept of historical materialism and claimed that political and economic development had reached its end; in other words whereas Marx had claimed that another stage of development was possible beyond capitalism ('true socialism' in the *German Ideology*), Fukuyama argued that capitalism had become our destiny and final resting place; there was no going beyond what we currently have. The fact that oppositional ideologies exist, such as Islam for instance, is a minor detail as the process of modernisation imposes itself on traditional systems. Fukuyama is after all an exponent of the modernisation theory, those apologists for global capitalism.

Celebrating what he called the victory of the liberal *idea* Fukuyama acknowledged the ruptures that exist within capitalism along with issues such as poverty but drawing the spectacular conclusion that despite the 'discrepancies' (my word) 'we have trouble imagining a world that is radically better than our own, or a future that is not essentially democratic and capitalist' (1992: 46). It's so reassuring that we can be comforted by the statements of this loose sage in a world beset by economic problems fermented by a vicious unregulated banking system overseen by a political framework that Fukuyama so celebrated. The fact that he can still be called upon (BBC Newsnight, April 2009) to offer his prophetic insights also informs us much of the decrepit BBC news channel that 'wholly, exclusively and necessarily' rely on liberal sources of information, rather than sources who may offer real alternatives.

In similar style, the UK based *Sunday Telegraph's* editorial (Sunday May 17<sup>th</sup> 2009) titled 'Radical action now can restore faith in our democracy' offered a stout defence of representative democracy. For most British-based readers the reason the *Telegraph* had done so will come as no surprise, but for those who are unfamiliar with what has become a political scandal of huge proportions perhaps a brief explanation is in order. Many democratically elected Members of Parliament in the UK (MPs) have been accused of abusing the system wherein many had made excessive expenses claims or to put it bluntly many had their snouts in the proverbial trough. So serious is this

issue that the Criminal Prosecution Service (CPS) and the Police are considering whether both Fraud and Theft have been committed by MPs, some of which have offered amendments to the 2007 Freedom of Information Act that would exempt Parliament from public scrutiny. There is a crisis of Parliament and even the idea that Parliament should have been dissolved was mooted.

The paper, with strong conservative allegiances, launched into a tirade against the abuses that had occurred whereby 'The effect has been to undermine representative democracy itself' and then stated a 'series of radical measures' should be implemented by politicians to restore trust; it's interesting that the word 'radical' in this context is perfectly acceptable whereas 'radical Islam' or 'radical Hugo Chavez' isn't. Radical in this context is differentiated from the word 'extremists' which the paper feared would benefit from the scandal. Within the paper's personal view of radical it offered advice of what radical changes would be in order to save *their* beloved representative democracy:

'Here are some ideas they might consider: abolish all discretionary expenses to MPs. Pay, at a fixed rate, the cost of the staff that they need to do the job properly, and increase the annual salary that MPs receive. The *quid pro quo* would be that there would be fewer MPs. Fewer MPs would cost the taxpayers less ...'.

Unfortunately this is not very 'radical' at all, but inane, grossly limited and deeply disingenuous. The newspaper argued that people who had moats around their house (Douglas Hogg, Conservative MP) should not claim taxpayers' money in order to have it cleaned. But this fails to address the question: why does he have a moat in the first place? The 'ideas' set forth by the paper to the scandal is a classic example that supporters of what has become known as representative democracy use to defend its legitimacy. The fact is the near collapse of the banking system (bailed out with public funds) along with the abuse of the political system (misuse of public funds) is symptomatic of a corrupt economic and political system that isn't true political representation for the people but rather has merely served big business and their allies of the political establishment. The *Telegraph*, like Fukuyama and their supporters, have trumpeted the 'values' of this system for years and the paper with its dominance within the newspaper 'free market', are petrified of the idea that a popular based challenge to their authority may be at hand.

In France, the left are already emerging as a strong force, and this is without the political scandal of the UK. Perhaps the French political class should now come under scrutiny for their economic interests? In the UK the left remain ineffective with the small Respect Party continuing to campaign on single issues such as the defence of Palestinians. Whilst this is honourable, right and just it signifies the inability of the left to launch an effective campaign on the wider issues of capitalism and the form of representative democracy the rich and powerful prefer. This may change, but for the moment it is another small party that is taking the initiative.

On Radio 4's Any Questions (Friday May 22<sup>nd</sup> 2009) Caroline Lucas the leader of the Green Party for England and Wales and MEP for South East England stood out from the other mainstream panellists (one each from the labour party, conservative and liberal democrats) in that she not only condemned the abuse of privilege but more importantly challenged the authority and legitimacy of the system itself by stating the scandal surrounding the abuse of expenses was 'symptomatic of a system which is fundamentally rotten'; this brought the loudest cheer from the audience and longest applause.

Later in the debate Lucas informed the audience that with the removal of the Speaker of the House, the first since Sir John Trevor was ceremoniously removed in 1695, that there was a golden opportunity to 'open up this political system'. Lucas also spoke out against MPs who had two jobs and thus boosting their income (some have more than two and sit on boards of directors, plus reap financial rewards when they 'retire'). She launched an attack against corporate lobbying, called for a more democratic, accountable Parliament that would reflect the people it represented, and ended by stating the opportunity is here to 'blast-open this rotten system once and for all' (loud cheers, long-standing applause again). On Caroline Lucas's website you can read her 'Correspondence about workers' rights' and other campaigning issues.

In an interview conducted in *The Guardian* (Monday May 18<sup>th</sup> 2009) Lucas was asked:

'Is she an anti-capitalist? A long pause follows. "Yes," she says carefully. "I'm an anti-capitalist. But I don't think it's a particularly helpful label, and I wouldn't go out and say that that is the positioning the party wants to take. This whole left/right, socialist/capitalist dichotomy is getting so out of date; the label I'd prefer is we are progressive, and care about social and environmental justice.'"

Lucas, and The Green Party I presume, are old fashioned Liberals with respect to their views on the role of the market in society; against monopoly and for multiplying small business structures (petty bourgeoisie ) with a smattering of socialist-democratic ideas, namely the redistribution of wealth, so not against substantial wealth-making. Whatever the pros and cons of these positions, the fact remains that perhaps one positive point has now entered the fray; the return of real political grassroots debate about the validity of a corrupt system in the UK today.

## **Links**

Caroline Lucas on Workers' Rights:

<http://www.carolinelucasmep.org.uk/2009/05/19/correspondence-about-workers-rights/>

G2 interview with Caroline Lucas G2 (*The Guardian*)

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/may/18/interview-caroline-lucas-green-party>

Fukuyama, F. (1992) *The End of History and the Last Man Standing*.