

Civic Republicanism and Citizenship: the Challenge for Today

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Consider this first essay in this series as a ‘secular sermon’. I will preach on and around three texts. Their admonishments and message will be that while, of course, you and I all want to be good citizens, particularly for others to be good citizens, particularly for young people to be very good citizens, yet surveys, common observation and the content of the media all show that many or most of our fellow citizens are losing the desire, the will and the means to be active citizens. Some commentators now gravely discuss whether apathy is not a good thing, an indicator of contentment – and some politicians may privately agree with them. But, as it is written in my translation of the book of Proverbs, ‘Do or you will be done by’. A bare 51 per cent of us were engaged enough to vote in the 2005 General Election, even to choose as if from the best of a bad job. And of eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds, only four out of ten voted.

Sir Alistair Graham, the Commissioner for Standards in Public Life, published a survey last month, widely reported, showing that less than a quarter of us generally trust government ministers to tell the truth. Ministers are fifteenth in the pecking order of trust in the professions, hovering just below estate agents. ‘Lack of trust’, he said, ‘leads to public cynicism and disengagement in the political system . . . damaging to the very fabric of our democracy.’

Yet too few of us are willing to stir our stumps to be *active citizens*, to work at least for a better society. We leave professional politicians to do that for us, or simply want them to leave us alone to get on with what is oddly called the quiet and private life of competitive individualism. The ten-, eleven- or twelve-hour working day of the Victorian poor is now normal for all classes, sometimes voluntarily yet more often caught up in a machine that may appear to each individual to be out of control, but is in fact encouraged by government. Successive British governments have, after all, largely opted out of the European Union’s limitations on

working time, at the same time as ministers expose their neglected families dutifully smiling for the cameras.

We may now be facing the inability of either politicians or publics to prevent outcomes that are actually degrading our planet. So I offer no excuses in launching this series on contemporary citizenship to begin by going back to remind us from where our political institutions and ideas have evolved. From out of the ancient Greek and Roman worlds we have fashioned – ‘we’ of the so-called Western or, in a non-ethnic sense, European traditions – two great and civilising cultural inventions: natural science and the ideas and practices of free citizenship. But neither can be taken for granted. Both need continual activity and now, not just institutional repair, but rejuvenation of their spirit.

So my first text, fellow citizens, if I may address you so oddly (but you probably are, else you wouldn’t have come), is from the Periclean oration as related by the historian Thucydides in Athens of the fifth century BC:

Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. . . . Here each individual is interested not only in his own affairs but in the affairs of the state as well: even those who are mostly occupied with their own business are extremely well-informed on general politics – this is a peculiarity of ours: we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all. We Athenians, in our own persons, take our decisions on policy or submit them to proper discussions: for we do not think that there is an incompatibility between words and deeds; the worst thing is to rush into action before the consequences have been properly debated.

Now modern historians tell us that in fact Pericles was a wee bit of a demagogue. And like Mr Blair he sometimes fell just a wee bit short of what he preached. But consider the ideas Pericles had to use to carry his audience; that says a lot for their level of understanding and aspirations so long ago, what I have called political literacy. His oratory was about more than maximising life chances for material advancement and spasmodic domestic bliss.

His argument that before action there must be proper public debate, but action none the less, this is at the heart of what modern scholars have come to call civic republicanism. Civic republicanism signified both a value and a theory. The value was freedom itself, specifically free public debate among others as the very essence of free citizenship. The theory was that states are stronger when their actions are understood and supported by their citizens. It is free and open debate that holds a state together not, as Plato had believed, agreement on a common core of true and transcendent values.

Some of our leaders and leader writers are now worrying themselves and us silly about the alleged dangers of multiculturalism; so they argue the need, like low-grade Platonic opportunists, for an over-riding, as it were transcendent, common core of values, which they then somewhat parochially call British. But the father of political thinking, Aristotle, said in his book *The Politics* that Plato was mistaken in his teaching about justice to try to find by philosophy an ideal, transcendent unity. On the contrary, it was the case that

there is a point at which a *polis* [a political community] by advancing in unity, will cease to be a *polis*: there is another point, short of that at which it may still remain a *polis*, but will none the less come near to losing its essence, and will thus be a worse *polis*. It is as if you were to turn harmony into mere unison, or to reduce a theme to a single beat. The truth is that the *polis* is an aggregate of many members.

Aristotle implies that even a small city state contained an aggregation, a diversity of values and interests among its citizens. Yes, I have not forgotten that the citizen class itself was then a minority – women, slaves, debtors and foreign residents were excluded from political rights. But the unique path and practices of free citizenship had been marked and set down that could in modern times gradually be broadened out into something like democracy.

Even in medieval Europe state councillors and the learned never lost the memory of this possible something else that had once existed: the political way of doing things of the Greek city states and the institutions and laws of the Roman Republic. That republic, indeed, had a great empire, the largest ever in the world until the British Empire of the nineteenth century. Thinking of which, the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead in his book *The Aims of Education* wrote of his Victorian schooldays that he had learnt his politics from his Classics masters. They were enamoured of the Roman Republic but disapproved highly of the *Principate*, the time of the emperors (as you should if you watch the BBC's Roman epics). They blamed the **fall of republican Rome on imperial expansion**, therefore they were Gladstonian Liberals to a man, totally against 'on to Khartoum', 'on to Kabul', and some even against 'on to Pretoria'.

The Roman word 'res-publica' implied that things that are public must be of public concern: active citizens should and could manage the state, neither kings nor aristocratic oligarchies alone or today single parties. Citizens treat each other as equals. **The public culture of politics is quite different from the private, secretive decision-making and politicking in autocracies.** Republicanism did not necessarily imply democracy

– democracy was seen as a necessary element in mixed government, not the overriding principle. Property, education or extraordinary public service were the basic qualifications for citizenship, but even ancient and early modern republics were more participative in spirit than most modern so-called democracies enshrining individualistic, market liberalism.

The much-maligned Niccolò Machiavelli stated a theory of civic republicanism in his *Discorsi*. A state is stronger if it can trust a patriotic citizen class with arms. Bearing and providing arms for war and the mutual trust needed was often the qualification for citizenship. The vexed right to bear arms in the US constitution had its roots in old republican theory and practice. So freedom in a state, said Machiavelli, meant tolerating social conflict between classes; but conflict if well managed, if handled by political compromises, can be a source of strength and gives liveliness to political debate. For a republic to sustain itself and flourish, citizens must have civic spirit, what he called *virtu*, and if this *virtu* declines – or has never been present – whether by indolence, corruption, decadence or fear, there can be no republic only autocracy. *Virtu* is a nice and curious word, roughly translated as civic spirit, but then spirit of an intensity few of us now feel. It derives from the Latin ‘vir’ for man, or rather manliness. For courage is involved in political life, sometimes physical courage even – as Pericles of Athens famously said ‘the secret of liberty is courage’. They’ll take it away from you if you don’t defend it. The secret of liberty is not just ‘eternal vigilance’, as Lincoln did not say, but eternal activity as well. Machiavelli’s *virtu* has nothing to do with Christian virtues, indeed Machiavelli thought the Church was sapping republican spirit. What is proper to a man to be truly a man is courage, fortitude and audacity in public affairs; but all this is useless without political skill and knowledge. (But I note defensively that he does give one, if only one, example of extraordinary *virtu* in a militant woman.)¹

Machiavelli’s realistic restatement of an admittedly idealised picture of the Roman Republic became immensely influential. These ideas of a free and forceful citizenry helped animate the Dutch Republic in its struggles against Spain, Protestant Sweden in the Thirty Years War, England and Scotland in the civil wars, the American then the Spanish colonies in revolt, and also the French Revolution. (Somewhat bizarrely the recent statue of David Hume in Edinburgh’s High Street has him be-togaed in eighteenth-century fashion). Closer to our times, an Italian Marxist in prison, Antonio Gramsci, produced a Communist variant on civic republicanism to refute Lenin’s obsession with the state and one party dictatorship. Gramsci argued that the participative co-operation between industrial workers and intellectuals was now the key to the rise and fall

of societies rather than Machiavelli's armed citizens or the militias of the American colonies.

Civic republicanism was strong in the early United States. Jeffersonian democracy was a cult of active citizenship which made virtues of simplicity of manners, plain-speaking, candour and high literacy – an ability to turn one's hand to anything practical as well as to read deeply and think restlessly for the common good. These virtues were to be universalised by personal example – the ideal image of the common man. Emmanuel Kant philosophised it, building on Rousseau. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century when, at public dinners, innumerable toasts were drunk, whether by American Democrats, British Whigs or radicals, among them was always 'To Republican Virtues, three times three'. In Britain, even here in Scotland, this could follow the loyal toast because civic republicanism, unlike 'red republicanism' or Jacobinism, was, to the disgust of Tom Paine, not against constitutional monarchy as such, in its place, up to a point.

Now to the second text of this half-learned sermon. The French writer Benjamin Constant, in an essay of 1820 (I'm getting nearer to the present day, and the point may be slowly emerging) on *The Liberty of the Ancients Compared to that of the Moderns* saw the difference between active citizenship and good citizenship clearly enough:

The aim of the ancients was the sharing of social power among citizens of the same fatherland: this is what they called liberty. The aim of the moderns is the enjoyment of liberty in private pleasures; and they call liberty the guarantees accorded by institutions to these pleasures.

Well now, we have reached in 1820 the present day rather early. This text shows both the concept and the critique of 'the consumer society' arising long before we recently named this somewhat degrading and somewhat pleasing cultural change. R. H. Tawney in the 1920s had called it, in the title of a book still worth reading, *The Acquisitive Society*. Now, of course, Benjamin Constant in his time, which was still a predominantly rural economy, was either exaggerating or prophesying. (The American humourist Mr Dooley was to say 'a prophet is a man who foresees trouble'.) For throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries all over the Western world there were ever increasing movements of the disenfranchised to gain the vote, to gain social power, to become not just legal citizens but to gain the rights of political citizens. I call this civic republicanism. But I must ask, having gained a democratic franchise, what has been done with it; or what have new elites done to the new peoples? I will suggest that after these mass movements of active citizenship,

too many of the beneficiaries have lapsed back into the condition that Constant described as modern liberty: **happy just to enjoy the guarantee that the state gives to personal safety and private pleasures**. Scholars call this the liberal theory of the state. And yet key indicators suggest that people are not entirely happy with this social contract or unpolitical new deal. Remember those surveys telling us that government ministers, indeed most politicians, are more distrusted than even estate agents and journalists?

But, as Lenin once said, 'one step forward, two steps back'. Before coming to what can be done, I must go back to an important rethinking of the idea of **active citizenship and civic republicanism that began here in Scotland in the eighteenth century**: the idea of the importance for liberty of civil society. When old writers talked of civil society they simply meant the whole state, or rather those few states where civil society was an arena of political active citizens: that is John Locke's 'civil government', Emmanuel Kant's *Bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, Machiavelli and Jefferson's republican government or Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *état civil* dedicated to realising the general will of ordinary people. But in the second half of the eighteenth century the concept of civil society began to take on a new meaning, largely due to the thinking here in Scotland of Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson. It pointed to the importance for liberty of semi-autonomous institutions standing between the individual and the state – those of commerce and the market, legal and clerical institutions and associations; gradually all manner of semi-autonomous groups and voluntary bodies were seen in this way, and later on political parties, pressure groups and trade unions. They were as much restraints on the state as formal constitutions and they were the training ground for active citizenship in society as a whole. I said semi-autonomous because their degree of freedom depended on reform of old laws but never on the absence of law. Adam Smith recognised that the working of free markets needed some regulation – a strong but minimal state – and a degree of common morality against fraud and for the everyday honouring of informal contracts. Hegel in his *Philosophy of Right* grandly saw civil society as the sphere of ethical life interposed between the family and the state.

Alexis de Tocqueville, in his great book *Democracy in America*, gave lasting expression to this new idea of civic republicanism as built on civil society. He saw dangers in democracy: there could be a 'tyranny of the majority' – majority opinion was and still can be intolerant (think of popular attitudes to punishment and immigrants) – and a majority could be content to sit back and let self-government be done for them; but he saw the great mitigating factor in America as being the dispersal of central

power in the federal system, the liveliness of local government and the multiplicity of voluntary bodies. Following his observations thinkers and scholars slowly began a critique of the whole theory of sovereignty which had asserted that everywhere there must be some final, absolute central source of authority. Thinkers and scholars slowly evolved a theory of pluralism, that power is inherently dispersed; no state is powerful enough to override some internal groups and interests. What holds things together is simply civil society itself, the tolerance and necessary compromises of politics itself.

But somehow after Tocqueville the concept of civil society fell into disuse, even if the reality remained. Perhaps it was simply taken for granted; and nationalist ideologies needed to stress unity and sovereignty. Both popular and learned debates tended to go round and round about what should one *really* mean by sovereignty? What should one really mean by constitutional government or by democracy?

However, it was revived in the 1980s and its revival vindicated the thinking of Gramsci, that obscure unorthodox Italian Communist, when in prison in the 1930s. He had gone back to Hegel by detaching the idea of civil society from the economy, reattaching it to the state but to show that states, to retain power, cannot rely on coercion or law alone but have to gain the consent of different cultures within society. This well described what began to happen in Eastern Europe, even in Russia itself, in the last days of Communist rule. The state power could not be challenged directly but there grew up a kind of non-violent guerrilla warfare waged through cultural and educational beliefs and institutions which even would-be totalitarian Communism had failed to eradicate or to win over completely – nationality groups especially. The dissidents and then the protestors had something to build on, strong folk memories of times before the Communists. Of course, by the same token, creating democratic institutions in states that never had an articulate and varied civil society is, while not impossible, extraordinarily difficult.

I draw from this that citizenship has to be learnt and practiced among the groups of civil society, not necessarily by joining political parties with their direct relationship with the state, all the time wanting to possess it in their own interest. But politics is too important to be left to politicians. I will say that again. So now to the final text of this secular sermon.

The mission statement from the 1998 education report for England, *Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools*:

We aim at no less than a change in the political culture of this country both nationally and locally: for people to think of themselves as active citizens,

willing, able and equipped to have an influence in public life and with the critical capacities to weigh evidence before speaking and acting; to build on and to extend radically to young people the best in existing traditions of community involvement and to make them individually confident in finding new forms of involvement and action among themselves.

The advisory committee who signed up to that, including Lord Baker, the former Conservative Secretary of State for Education, were not told by their chairman that they had signed up to the civic republican theory of the state and, in effect, repudiated the strict individualistic liberal theory of the state. As chairman and principle draftsman, I didn't want to provoke them. One of the two Blunketts signed up to it knowingly and made it part of the compulsory national curriculum in England (that is Blunkett the good, not Blunkett the bad). At the time it could sound New Labour enough for No. 10 even if now it might sound like a reproach or satire on how they have governed.

Could there possibly be a change in the political culture of this country towards far greater active participation? **Could we move away from the simple market liberal image of the private citizen getting on with his or her life protected by good laws and the state; or perhaps from realistically seeing democracy, as some political scientists have done, as simply fair competition for office by political parties mobilising a mass electorate.** Individuals can and do, of course, assert their rights more strongly than ever before. Man-made definitions of human rights are now part of law. Remember that they are man-made. The scepticism of David Hume about natural rights is justified. The idea of universal human rights is good human invention and, of course, such rights can be made and remade. But this is a cautious digression. My main point is that the civic republican tradition always saw rights and duties as reciprocal. That may be going too far. People should still have rights even if they have no sense of civic duty, sometimes even moral duty. But the theory was that rights *should* inspire duties, just as we have a duty to respect the rights of others. Some teachers in schools are now teaching human rights, especially the UN charter of the Rights of the Child, as if that is citizenship. It is not. Alone it is liberal individualism pushed to a delusionary extreme. Do we want a litigious rights culture? **Citizenship is individuals voluntarily acting together for a common purpose. Class actions in courts can protect rights but will not create democracy or a civic culture.**

So in ordinary talk as well as scholarly one sees liberal theory as demanding 'good citizenship', invoking 'the rule of law', good behaviour, individual rights and at its best moral virtues of care and concern for others, beginning with neighbours and hopefully reaching out to strangers.

But it may stop short of demanding 'active citizenship', what scholars call 'civic republicanism', people combining together effectively to change or resist change. I call that true citizenship.

Well, is change possible or are we too far down the road of unsocial individualism and the values of a consumer society? Change is possible if we go back to the sense of what I said about the rediscovery of the idea of civil society within the state, rather than the old liberal view of a direct relationship of individuals to the state mediated only by the law, rights and the market. If the civic republican theory of liberty being based on civil society is correct, the general answer is quite obvious: as much power as possible must be devolved from the centre to sub-groups, regions and localities. The difficulties are partly practical and administrative but even more so breaking from a rigid mind-set, what William Blake once called 'mind forged manacles'.

Think how many local variations in Health Service provision or school provision and practices are at once damned by the media as 'post-code lotteries'. But post-code lotteries are the price, could be the advantage, of avoiding the uniform rules of a centralised bureaucracy, a bureaucracy itself constantly pressured by ministers to change to another set of uniform rules in response to media campaigns. Devolution means inevitable variation in local decisions, so long as those decisions are reasonably transparent and open to local democratic influence or control. The alternative is what we have, especially on the vast scale of England's 50 million inhabitants, government by centralised bureaucracy. To hell with the post-code lottery argument, I say; diversity is a price worth paying for liberty, community and local democracy. To avoid it at all costs is the open licence for a stifling central bureaucracy.

Leaders of all parties now genuinely declaim the need to increase public participation and yet they don't welcome real variations in local and regional practices, unless politically they have to, as in Scottish and Welsh devolution; and these are seen in England as unwelcome exceptions not as incitements to emulation. However, may I come down to earth with a bump and point to one unexpected sign that civic republicanism could be rediscovered.

There was a brief passage in Gordon Brown's recent Labour Party conference speech that got very little attention in the media:

I tell you: just as in the last century governments had to take power from vested interests in the interests of communities, in the new century people and communities should now take power from the state and that means for the new challenges ahead a reinvention of the way we govern: the active citizen, the empowered community, open enabling government. When I made the Bank of

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England independent, and to build trust in economic decision-making, I gave executive power away and I want a radical shift of power from the centre.

How seriously should we take that, I wonder? How seriously does he take it? We may see. But it points in the right direction even if, I suspect, it is as yet more from a gut feeling – that David Cameron also shares – that something has gone wrong in the system, than any clarity as yet about what to do. A conversation on the constitution, but nothing as formal or unpredictable as a Royal Commission on the government of the United Kingdom. But if at the moment they are no clearer in the head than Edward Bear, at least they begin to think about it. Yes, I did say Edward Bear. For as Christopher Robin drags him downstairs by one leg it is

bump, bump, bump on the back of his head. It is as far as he knows the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it.

NOTE

1. The reference here is to the Countess (Mistress Catherine) Girolamo whose *virtu* is evident in her ruthless deployment of her feminine attributes, though sacrificing her hostage children, to avoid conspirators, who had killed her husband, from taking the citadel at Forli. The account is to be found in Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Discourses*, edited with introduction by Bernard Crick (London: Penguin Books, 1970), Bk 3, ch. 6 'On Conspiracies', p. 419.