

Time and Democracy

If democracy among the living demands democracy among the dead, what are we to say of future generations? Are the unborn, and the earth they inherit, entitled to exercise their vote among the living? If so, how could they make their preferences felt?

Until quite recently, such questions made no sense to democrats. The future was for them of minor interest, save as a positive projection of the present. Democracy implied a lively faith in the future, in the perfectibility of citizens and the governments under which they lived. The enemies of democracy pounced on this point: democracies see only themselves in the future. They overvalue the present, infect their citizens with blindness, myopia of the kind that bothered old Plato, for whom assembly democracy was nasty government led by self-flattering idiots who act on a whim and do just as they please, in the name of equality. The earliest critics of representative democracy issued similar complaints. 'Every step and every movement of the multitude', commented Adam Ferguson, 'even in what are termed enlightened ages, are made with equal blindness to the future'. Edmund Burke's broadside against the French revolutionaries repeated the point. Fully confident in its power to change the world, contemptuous of the rights of the unborn, a perfect democracy was the most shameless thing in the world, he said.

The same complaints are still heard today. Voters are said to be interested mainly in lining their pockets. Burying their heads in the sands of the present, they say that things are good, or getting better; or that nothing ever changes, that human nature is human nature, and that evidence about the future is unreliable - if only because the future is by definition unknowable. It is true that things can be predicted only after they happen, but the old griping about the myopia of democracies is losing its grip. The age of monitory democracy fosters entirely different expectations. The common sense that the present is pregnant with the future, that life must be lived forwards, that democracy is an exercise in living on the edge of future time, is growing. So too is voting for posterity.

Many forces feed the change, including the spread of nuclear and bio-chemical weapons; breakthroughs in nanotechnology and biogenetics; and large-scale mega-projects that draw attention to long and risky investment cycles, and to dangerous unintended consequences. Wilful sabotage of the biosphere is another of the reasons why awareness of 'bio-time' - rhythms very different than the tick-tick mechanical clock time of humans - is seeping into the calculations of citizens and their representatives. It is as if the future is demanding a say - demanding the right to be represented in human affairs.

Battles have begun for the enfranchisement of the planet and its future peoples. The conflicts will be ferocious, as hard-fought as the old struggles to enfranchise slaves, women, workers and the colonised. The outcomes of these coming contests will be interesting, if startling. One thing only is certain: the history of democracy is to be continued....