

But is it democracy? A new language of politics for a new generation published in 'The Article 11.11.20

“Democracy must take its course” insisted Joe Biden as the polls nudged him on towards apparent victory. But was it, and is it, democracy of the kind which people really want and still believe in? Not, it seems, if one is a “millennial” or younger, according to a survey from the Cambridge University Centre for the Future of Democracy. Their question to millennials round the world, although mostly in the US and the UK, produces a clear view that among the younger generation faith in democracy is in distinct decline.

Of course, this kind of polling begs a string of other questions. Which kind of democracy, with which features are we talking about? Is it the mass voting sort we have just been watching across the Atlantic, or the parliamentary sort which gives extensive choosing power to choose the leader from smallish numbers of party activists, or the referendum sort which gave us Brexit, or the multi-coalition sort which satisfies no single party — or the *faux* sort offering occasional dodgy elections entrenching semi-autocrats in the name of the people?

Surely what this generation, now in their thirties and early forties, is really saying is that the system of government under which they live, whatever name it goes by, is no longer working — for them at least — and therefore they would like to see something much better at delivering a higher and fairer quality of government.

It could still be called democracy, but of a new, more connected and trustworthy kind, with the benefits more widely shared and with political leaders less out of touch than they seem today. If current forms of democracy cannot deliver the “quality government” people want — if democracy, whatever its variety, instead of providing government by consent as it is supposed to do, provides government by endless quarrel, bitter and polarised division and street violence, coupled with plain inefficiency, then what? Where are the millennials, and the so-called Generation X born after them, all going to turn for something better?

It doesn't need a survey to see the same scepticism extending towards capitalism (supposed only to flourish in democratic freedom), or at least what is currently labelled as capitalism — especially the feeling towards growing inequality and apparent concentration of wealth in ever fewer hands. Special bitterness is reserved for the perceived wealth bubble of the millennials' older predecessors, who seem to

have all the cash. This, they feel, is not a democratic outcome at all and it is certainly not the right kind of capitalism for them.

Is the answer, some ask, to be found in booming Asia, rather than in the disoriented and divided West? After all, Asian economies are not only growing faster but seem to have handled the present pandemic better. This applies to the strongest Asian democracies, such as Japan, as much as to its one-party giant neighbour, China, which talks of itself as socialist, while fostering capitalism of a kind on massive scale, even though democracy remains a dirty word. There is a real irony here that the PRC, having been in most people's view the source of Covid-19, has emerged fastest and is now presenting itself as the economic locomotive to rescue the battered global economy. As one leading columnist in *The Times* claimed recently — a shade over the top, perhaps — Covid “is killing faith in Western democracy”.

Of course, just as what we continue to call democracy in the West seems to many not very democratic any longer, what the Chinese call socialism is not really very socialist either. The Chinese people are in fact being offered something quite different. The target, which has just been repeated at the recently held Fifth Plenum, is a vast new middle class, with income per head of \$30,000. A strong form of managed capitalism, far from collapsing, will be in the ascendant. As for the state withering away à la Marx — not a chance. So much for the victory of the proletariat.

The reality behind the pretence is this. The economic, social and therefore political mixtures emerging in all six continents will turn out to conform neither to the “isms” of the past nor to the clichés of 20th-century European political discourse. Technology has sent a torpedo through the old ideological line-ups. What the disillusioned younger generations all round the world now demand is not old ideologies, but competent and transparent government presiding sensitively over a balance of careful state regulation, market innovation and space for creativity, with a good dose of freedom, fairness and justice added in to make it work.

Indeed, when you come to look at it, what the younger generations across the planet, whether in the West or East, North or South, are calling for is not all that dissimilar.

The Chinese plan for a future mixture of millions of small free enterprises, a vast and enriched middle class and a diminished, partly welfare role for slothful state-owned companies, could just as easily be called “capitalism with Chinese characteristics”. While the growing Western demand among the young for a future with much greater

equality, much wider sharing of rewards and benefits and far greater social responsibility on the part of all corporates could just as easily come to be described as “socialism with Western characteristics”.

In the end, the Chinese leaders will have to concede more freedom and people power, call it democratic socialism or call it what you will, to keep up with the frenzied pace of innovation and creativity on which the future insists. And, in the end, Western governments will have to engineer much wider sharing of income and wealth, with a stronger role for the state in some areas and for the market in others.

Wise leaders would do best to avoid attaching the old ideological labels to either of these emerging models, and recognise instead that revolutionary technology is fundamentally altering the behaviour of individuals to one another, of businesses, of economies and of nations. It has become a cliché that networks are changing the way the world works and they are changing the way our minds work. What John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* long ago called “the inner domain of consciousness”, where he believed the true frontier of freedom lay, has been penetrated. A new kind of populist connectivity is going to push its way through just about everywhere, regardless of the doctrines, theories and labels to which officials may cling.

So, a prize for the genius, in the vanguard of thinking, who can come up with the new language needed to guide and inspire confused millennials and even younger generations everywhere. Just as our forefathers invented the words “capitalism” and “socialism” only a couple of centuries ago, to describe the new industrial world emerging, with modern democracy arriving later still, so we need the same inventiveness to describe the digital world that has replaced it. That’s the real challenge now for thinkers and leaders, East and West, if they want to hold their societies together.
