



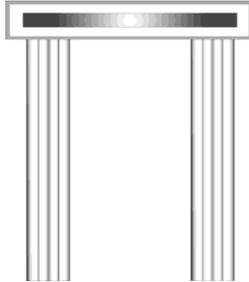
John Marenbon

Populism and Democracy

Politics in the Public Interest

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I

Introduction: Unpopular Politicians

Politicians today of all parties are poorly regarded in the UK. Only a few months after the election of a fresh government, 2010 closed with a fresh round of public contempt directed towards the Liberal Democrats for their unprincipled behaviour over university tuition fees. Low esteem on such a scale is a relatively new phenomenon in British politics. Yet it has developed at a time when politicians relentlessly court the voters with every trick known to marketers. In fact the two trends may be related.

For, although most people in Britain today accept that politics should be democratic, they deplore populism. It is enough to say a measure has, or lacks, democratic legitimacy to justify or condemn it. By contrast populism is always a pejorative term: it is enough to dismiss a government or politician to describe them as 'populist'. British politicians, this pamphlet will argue, confuse populism and democracy, mainly because their view of democracy itself is too narrow. The result of their populism is not, in the end, to earn popularity, but distrust and dislike. If politicians are to govern wisely – and in so doing win the respect of the people – they must avoid the populism which dominates British politics today.

This pamphlet considers the confusions which have led to the problem and proposes how to overcome them, so that politics is conducted in the national interest. After showing how populism dominates British politics today, it examines the relationship between populism and democracy. When democracy is understood as government in accord with the will of the majority ('popular democracy'), it cannot be distinguished from populism. But if democracy is understood procedurally, as a system in which the majority is ultimately responsible for the choice of government, populism can be avoided, as it needs to be, if Britain is to be well governed and politicians are to regain the people's esteem.

II Populism Triumphant

Despite appearances to the contrary, populism is triumphant in British politics today. No doubt the politicians themselves would indignantly rebut the charge. Is the Government not at this very moment in the process of making a set of severe cuts in public spending which are likely to bring it considerable unpopularity? How can it be accused of populism? Looking more broadly, the kinds of policy most often described as populist – those which pander to popular hatred of certain groups – seem rarely to have been adopted by mainstream British parties. British people can be proud that they have had no figure like Le Pen in France, who enjoyed remarkable political success on the basis of populist policies based on dislike of immigrants.

But populism is of various kinds. Some of them dominate British politics, and even the other sorts, such as short-term populism and populism based on hate, are not entirely absent. Short-term populism is the populism that belongs to day-to-practical politics: a course of action is chosen because it guards against some clear danger, or secures some obvious advantage *in the short term*, but at the cost of risking greater dangers or running greater losses in the longer term. Politicians have always, are and always will be tempted by short-term populism – in this country we need only think, most recently, about the behaviour of Mr Brown's government in its final months (and Conservative governments have been equally guilty). Although in the broad thrust of its economic policies, the present Coalition government is admirably avoiding this sort of populism (and the Opposition is taking advantage of its powerlessness to embrace it), many of the details show the temptations of seeking short-term advantage.

Populism based on hatred is often associated with the exploitation of racial or religious hatred, but any special group of people can be its victims, and, although British mainstream politicians usually avoid racist populism, they are certainly not above populist attacks on other sorts of groups. At the moment – and not just in the UK – it is bankers who are their victims. Another common group which such populism targets are the politicians. This populism has become almost the staple of US politics, with aspirants to the Congress or Senate or the Presidency itself anxious to distance themselves from the politicians, who are held up as objects for populist hatred. In the UK this theme was recently given a new and bizarre twist. A popular newspaper, apparently dishonestly, obtained details of the expense claims by Members of Parliament. From these, it turned out that a surprisingly few MPs were really corrupt – charges have been brought against just three members of the Commons and one Peer. But public hatred was fanned by irresponsible reporting in some of the press, making MPs figures of contempt for no better reason than that they owned what many of their constituents would have liked too – a big house or garden or a tennis court. But who

were the first, after the journalists, to try to use this popular hatred to their own ends? The politicians themselves, or at least the leaders of the parties, who competed to satisfy the demand for victims, guilty or innocent.

Although British politics today is certainly not free from short-term populism or populism based on hatred, the two sorts of populism that dominate are of a different, newer variety, which hide under an unexamined and vague notion of democracy. The first of these sorts – the populism of ‘representation’ – concerns the mechanism of politics: the way in which we choose the politicians who will both conduct day-to-day politics and government and who often take a role in formulating more general policy.

The way ‘represent’ has changed in meaning epitomizes the character of this type of populism. Representative government means, traditionally, government which is not a direct democracy, but rather in which the people choose a select group to do the business of government as their representatives. These representatives are not supposed in any sense to be like the people they represent. On the contrary, they should be those who are good at the business of policy and politics which they are elected to conduct. This older meaning of ‘representative’ has almost entirely been lost in political discourse (it remains in other contexts – for instance, a sales representative’s job is to act on behalf of his or her firm). ‘Representative’ in political language is now generally an adjective. In this new sense, one group is representative of another larger group where the variety of its members is similar: so the proportions of men and women, young and old, able and disabled, racial minorities are roughly the same. Similarly, an individual is thought to be ‘representative’ of a group if he or she is like an average member of that group. It is now generally and unthinkingly accepted that those who stand for election to Parliament, from among whom most members of any government will be drawn, should be representative of the electorate in this sense of the word. It is seen as a matter for concern, needing rectification, that Parliament does not in fact mirror the racial, cultural and gender balance of society as a whole, and on the level of individual MPs, those choosing who can stand for election think it perfectly proper to try to choose someone like themselves and the people of the constituency, and some parties, so far from acting to eradicate this populism, have even encouraged it.

Politics is an activity which requires great ability and skill, if it is to be well conducted, whilst the formulation of policy can be done well only by those of high intelligence and good judgement. Picking politicians who are representative, in the contemporary sense, of the people who elect them is a sure recipe for having few or none who excel in conducting day-to-day politics, or are capable of formulating policy wisely. This populism is thus one that affects both the day-to-day running of the country, and deciding on policy. This sort of populism is encouraged by the idea that politicians must share every passing whim and fashion of the majority (from football to taste in music).

The second new sort of populism is the most pervasive and insidious of all. It is the populism of marketing. Political policies are seen as if they were goods or services, and the people as if they were the market for them. Just as the successful head of a business tries to find a product that will be bought by as many people as possible, so politicians infected by this populism – and how few of them are not! – try to devise the policies which they believe will appeal to a majority of the people, a popular product that many will buy by choosing to vote for the party that is offering it. The most shameless manifestation of this way of proceeding is the use of focus-groups. If a company were to launch a new breakfast cereal on to the market, it should, no doubt, arrange that carefully balanced samples of the public tried out samples in advance and gave their reactions. Too little sugar? Are the chocolate flakes big enough? Raisins or sultanas? It would use the results of these surveys to adjust the new product so that it fitted the public taste as closely as possible, since in that way it could hope for the best sales. The use of focus-groups applies this way of thought, entirely appropriate in the world of commerce, to policy formation. The aim becomes that of fitting policies, in every detail, to what will appeal to the public in general or, worse still, to what will appeal to some particular group of the public judged to be particularly important for electoral success. (Choosing on the basis of such partial appeal is *even* worse, because the desires of some particular section of the public selected for such reasons are likely to be even further from what is in the people's best interests than the desires of a balanced sample of the people.)

But why should not political policies be sold like cornflakes? When a product is sold on the market, those who want to buy it are in principle able to do so, but those who do not want it can leave it on the shelves. By contrast, political policies usually involve constraint on those who do not want to act as they require (often the indirect but severe constraint of being forced to pay through taxation). Moreover, commercial products have to list ingredients and potential dangers, and if necessary a health warning. Unfortunately, no such precautions apply to policy pronouncements.

The populism manifested by the use of focus groups and the fact that they are taken for granted is just one particularly blatant sign of an approach to policy that dominates most politics in Britain today. The two major parties have abandoned their various traditional ideologies, which at one time provided them with different, but reasonable conceptions of the public's best interests. In their place, they seek to clothe themselves in ideas of this colour, to please this section of the public, and that colour, to please that section, so that in the end they display themselves in a many-coloured, patchwork coat of ideas, chosen just because they are the ideas that are now in the air. No coherent conception of the people's best interests guides them, unless it is the notion that, in kitting themselves out in this way, to please their publics, they are serving democracy – since they cannot tell democracy apart from populism. The re-making of Labour's ideas and principles in the 1990s is now history, as they are now unmade and remade again – and all in the quest, not of the public's best interests, but its approval. New Conservatism (but it does not use that name, of course, because

'Conservatism' is too burdened with all the wrong connotations) is even more shameless than New Labour. Before the Election, the one aim was to make the Conservative brand saleable again, and now the goal is to keep and increase its market share, under the more customer-friendly 'Coalition' label. It is not opposition to any particular policy, or distrust of the individual political leaders but its abandonment of any attempt to formulate a coherent set of aims in pursuit of the people's best interests that explains why the fiercest opponents of the present Government are those who consider themselves Conservatives.

III

Distinguishing Populism from Democracy

One main reason why politicians in Britain today are populist is that they are confused about the nature of democracy. They believe that, to be democratic, they ought to make policies according to the will of the people. But, if this is what democracy means, how can it be distinguished from populism?

One way in which democratic politicians try to distinguish themselves from populists is by insisting that they are willing to take ‘tough’ decisions, which will not be immediately popular. They justify decisions like budget cuts or sending troops to fight elusive enemies in impossible wars by reasoning that, although democracy is government in accord with the will of the majority, not every decision a democratic government takes need correspond to the will of the majority of the people at that moment. A government might, for instance, make spending cuts or raise taxes in response to an economic crisis, knowing that a majority of the people do not agree with this decision. In doing so, it remains democratic, because in the longer term, when they see the benefits of these moves, a majority of the people will accept them. A government that fails to take these sorts of decisions, which are at the time unpopular, is populist.

But such a view is relevant to only one sort of populism, the ‘short-term populism’, where a government, for example, puts off necessary spending cuts and causes damage to the future economy. But there are many other ways in which politician can be populist, as already explained. Consider, for instance, the populism of a party that appeals to a widely-shared prejudice among the people of the country against one of its racial minorities. Besides, to claim to be acting for the longer term allows politicians whose unpopular policies remain unpopular to insist that they were following the will of the people, because *sometime* it will endorse their decision. But when?

Sometimes those politicians are regarded as populist who use an emotive policy to bring them their majority. Suppose 40 per cent of the population were strongly in favour of banning non-nationals from working in the country. If one of the political parties supported the ban, calculating that by adding many of this 40% to its ordinary supporters, victory would be certain, it would be guilty of populism according to this way of conceiving it. Populism, on this view, is a distortion of democracy, in which the will of the majority is thwarted by pandering to the overwhelming appeal to a substantial minority of some emotive issue.

But this, second, definition too, is unsatisfactory. If one holds that democracy is government in accord with the will of the majority, then one must accept that the policies which lead a party to be chosen by a majority are democratically endorsed, even if some of the voters have been won over by a single emotive issue. Furthermore, suppose that in the example above, 51 per cent of the population favoured the ban, clearly the ban would then be democratic, in the sense of carrying out the will of a majority of the people. Yet many would still want to call a party that advocated it 'populist', and condemn the party as such.

There is, indeed, as this last example shows, a tension between the intuitions that make us use 'populist' as a pejorative term, and democracy understood as government in accord with the will of the majority. At the root of our ordinary pejorative use of 'populist' is a very important distinction. Policies may be genuinely popular, that is to say, be favoured by a majority, *but also wrong*. But if we believe that the guiding principle of politics should be democracy, understood as following the will of the majority, then there is no room for this distinction, and so no room for the distinction between the pejorative word 'populism' and the eulogistic one, 'democracy'.

This position would mean that 'populism' should be regarded as an obsolete term, the pejorative implications of which reflect the values of times gone by (in the same way as, for instance, 'low-born', as a pejorative, derives its pejorative meaning from a system of class hierarchy that few would now follow). On this view, the rightness or wrongness of a policy would be determined by whether it is the will of the majority, and so the policies that one might be inclined to condemn as populist would be praised as being democratic.

We might, however, disagree and hold that what the common, pejorative use of 'populism' implies is true: that is to say, a policy may be favoured by a majority, even over the long-term, and be wrong. Indeed, perhaps it is their failure to acknowledge this anti-populist principle that accounts for the low esteem in which politicians are now held. But, if that is so, we need to think again about democracy as it is usually understood today.

IV

Popular Democracy

When a country such as Britain is said to be democratically governed, it usually means that it is governed in accord with the will of the majority. Similarly, governments believe that they are being democratic by honing their policies to the electors' wishes. Democracy, that is to say, is usually understood as what might be called 'popular democracy': rule in accordance with the will of the majority. This system is generally considered to be a good thing: the more democratic a government, the better. Non-democratic governments, whatever their apparent virtues, are generally regarded, at least by those living in democracies, as unacceptable.

Yet there are good reasons to think, not merely that popular democracy falls short of the claims made for it, but that it is altogether bad as a system of government. Though not a fashionable view, it has strong arguments in its favour. Two of them stem from fundamental, though opposite, truths. On the one hand an individual's wishes are often not in his or her own best interests. On the other hand, it is of great value to individuals to be allowed to make the important choices about how to live their own lives.

People's wishes fail to be in their own interests for three main reasons: weakness of will, the unpredictability of effects and ignorance. The reckless gambler, the spendthrift, the over-indulgent drinker usually know very well that their behaviour is against their best interests, and the same is true of many decisions many of us take. Those who have a personal concern for our well-being may try to help us fight weakness of will – and, indeed, that is a duty of parents and teachers towards children; but this is not an area for government policy, since public restrictions here would not likely to be effective and would greatly lessen people's freedom to make their own choices. Nor can government policy help in the many cases where we decide on a course of action which we reasonably expect to serve our best interests but which, because of factors that we could not have foreseen, goes against them. But the most common reason why people act against their best interests is that they are ignorant of them: they may have insufficient education and neither know the richness of choices open to them, nor have developed an ability to evaluate them well. Here government policy certainly has a place, by providing people with the opportunities and encouragement to become less ignorant. On a practical level, the individual citizen can discover a whole variety of choices for his or her future. On a higher, and ultimately more important, level many can profit by gaining acquaintance with a tradition of art and learning that enables them to move in an intellectual circle wider than that of their upbringing. Such policies can never hope for support from the majority, because they cater for a need of which it is unaware. Rule according to the will of the majority, as required by popular democracy, imposes a tyranny of ignorance.

Popular democracy not only fails to allow people to develop in understanding of their best interests it also thwarts their freedom to make individual choices. Policies that reflect the will of the majority often go against the wishes of a large minority, and sometimes thwart decisions of central importance to them. Some of the policies can be justified on the grounds that they prevent people from harming others, and others that they promote what is uncontroversially recognized as good. But popular democracy rarely confines itself to such policies. Rather, stirred up by the irresponsibility of democratic politicians, people are encouraged to want and vote for all varieties of policies that mould society in particular ways – which are presented as mending it (as if it were something that could be broken) or improving it – that thwart the freedom of choice of millions. In a popular democracy the wills of many people, often on the matters most important to them, will frequently be thwarted – just on the grounds that a majority of the people favours a course that has this effect. Their enthusiasms, aims, traditions, predilections will be of no account, unless they should happen to coincide with those of the majority.

The problem is particularly acute in a country like Britain today, because there are many different beliefs and values according to which people live their lives. Many of the views accepted by a majority as correct, or less unacceptable than other alternatives, are rejected by large minorities. It is a matter of dispute itself whether, in these clashes between different beliefs and values, one is correct, or some are more correct than others, or whether no such judgement can be made. Whatever the case, none of us knows *which* is correct; and politicians, although they often give the impression of knowing everything, are as ignorant as anyone else. In this state of ignorance, there is good reason to think that the people's best interests are served most by beginning from the basic liberal principle that each person should be free to pursue his or her own ends, except in so far as this pursuit harms others, and then qualifying it just in so far as there is overwhelmingly good reason to do so – as with indisputable benefits clearly to be gained or particular values, rules and prohibitions on which there is nearly general consent. What hope is there that a popular democracy will show such restraint? As De Tocqueville, Mill and many others feared, popular democracy imposes a tyranny of the majority.

A third argument against popular democracy comes from considering society as a whole. The argument so far has considered the best interests of the people by considering how each individual's best interests can be promoted. But in some areas, and most importantly in the distribution of wealth, the measures which will best serve the interests of some are arguably damaging to the interests of others. Policies in these areas should be decided in the best interest of the people as a whole. In countries, such as Britain and most others, where there is a fairly wide range in people's wealth and earnings, popular democracy tends to exert a pressure for redistribution. The poorer half of the population is likely to approve measures that promise to make the richer half share out their wealth with it. Although in practice, because the workings of an

economy are so much more complicated than politicians usually imagine, despite these policies, the gap between the rich and the poor remains the same or increases, this is seen as a failure in policy and new policies are proposed to remedy it. Yet it is far from clear that the economic egalitarianism favoured by popular democracy is in the best interests of the people as a whole. First, it may result in the impoverishment of the society as a whole, so that the less well off end up even poorer than under a less redistributive system. Second, whilst it is clear that poverty should be relieved, it is not clear that a narrower spread of wealth is in the better interests of everyone than a wider spread. Not only is the value of a more equal distribution in itself a debatable matter, but it cannot be achieved except at the expense of other valuable things, such as security in the ownership of property and freedom in choosing how to distribute it during life and at death, and freedom in selling one's own labour and buying that of others. In such complicated matters, it is hard to know where the truth lies, and so great reason to promote through public policy and legal constraint only those measures that are overwhelmingly accepted as right. Popular democracy knows no such restraint and tends towards a third sort of tyranny, that of egalitarianism.

V

Procedural Democracy

Democracy need not have the objectionable features that characterize popular democracy. The type of democracy – a procedural democracy – in which the people’s representatives rule in the best of interests of the whole nation, and a popular vote determines whether or not they remain in power, is not affected by them. It was this sort of democracy that, until quite recently, British politicians aspired to follow. Procedural democracy requires that the choice of government should lie with the majority. The people are not, therefore, given a direct say over the policies of a government, but they have an indirect control, since the people choose their representatives from different parties offering different policies. The electorate is thus able remove a government from power if it dislikes its policies.

For a procedural democracy of this sort to work properly, the mechanism of choice needs to be genuinely democratic, and the representatives need to be able for their job. For the choice to be democratic, there must be freedom for parties to form and compete with the governing party, and the voters should not be bribed or intimidated. It is for this reason that there are a number of countries where elections take place which cannot be considered democracies. To do their job properly, the representatives must be independently-minded, mature men and women of sound judgement, with a good understanding of the complex issues that surround policy-making today. They should, therefore, in no sense be the representatives of their electors in today’s corrupt sense of the word, according to which they would be like the average elector. Rather, they need to be exceptional in their education, ability and judgement.

Procedural democracy will not, indeed, *guarantee* the type of policies (liberal ones, in the old sense of the word) that are desirable, given politicians’ inability to judge between competing schemes of values and so the need to exercise constraint only where obviously needed. But at least it would make them possible, and wise representatives would see that they are desirable. Of course, about areas which cannot be left to individual’s particular decisions, such as redistribution, there is no reason to expect unanimity, especially from the wisest and most reflective representatives. Here the gain would be that what is at present taken for granted would be seen as a difficult, debatable question.

But will procedural democracy not immediately turn into popular democracy, as politicians seek to win and keep power by pleasing the people? In days past, Britain has had politicians who have not pandered to public opinion, but thought it their duty to educate it, and the British electorate has recognized that it is they who cared for its best interests and not those who promised it what it wanted. If we think that our politicians now cannot emulate, then perhaps we are underrating them, or perhaps we are choosing the wrong men and women to be politicians.

VI Conclusion

The dangers to Britain of its present popular democracy are great. To the age-old desire of politicians to win votes has been added the technology of marketing, which engineers both the packaging of policy and its contents to reflect popular whim. In place of the delicate judgements needed to govern in the people's best interests, given our ignorance of what in fact they are, politicians – intent on following the popular will – mouth whatever medley of diluted opinions is in fashion and let their policies be shaped by it.

The problem is all the graver because both the public and the political parties have embraced a corrupt idea of representation. Instead of the people's representatives being those most fit to govern, it is believed that, in order to be representative, politicians must present a mirror image of the electorate – in appearance, age, gender, sexuality, colour and even taste.

A first move away from popular democracy would be to ensure that politicians are fit to represent the people, not by adjusting their policies to the wishes of the majority, but by shaping them in the best interests of the nation and presenting themselves, on the basis of such policies, to the electorate. So far from preferring the candidates who are 'representative' in the corrupted, contemporary sense of the word, such public appointments should require at least the same intellectual and personal qualities as demanded for other similarly responsible positions – in the Civil Service or law or medicine, or at the head of businesses.

But for a proper procedurally democratic system to be established, there needs to be a revolution in political thinking. Here popular democracy has been even more potent than in political practice, acting as a drug to prevent thought about what we can confidently hold to be in the nation's best interests and how to ensure the freedom of individuals. Although there are some principles that are so widely endorsed that it would be foolish to question them (for example, the relief of poverty and sickness), almost every widely-accepted term of value and general belief in contemporary political discourse would benefit from scrutiny.

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John Marenbon

In *Populism and Democracy: Politics in the Public Interest*, John Marenbon, a fellow of Trinity College Cambridge, argues that populism is now the dominant force in British politics. But most people recognise it as a bad trend, which often leads to decisions damaging to the people's best interests. Dr Marenbon explores the fine line that divides populism from democracy, and explains how populist measures are often justified as democratic. He argues that if government is to act in the best interests of the people, the UK must aspire to a form of democracy which is not populist. By reverting to procedural democracy, the UK would restore a system that allows parties to propose policies because they are right, not because they are popular, while letting the people decide at election time on who should govern them.

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