



GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

MORTIMER J. ADLER

PART II (Continued)

Questions About Politics: Man and the State

12. REPUBLICS AND DEMOCRACIES

Dear Dr. Adler,

Do we have a democratic or republican form of government? What exactly is the difference between the two? Is the Soviet Union a true democracy, as its leaders claim?

N. C.

Dear N. C.,

Let us first be clear about what we mean when we talk about republican and democratic forms of government. A republic is simply that type of constitutional government in which officeholders are chosen by the citizens. A constitutional government is one in which the basic organization and offices are set forth by law. It is a government of laws rather than of men. Louis XIV's "I am the state" and Adolf Hitler's "I am the law" are typical expressions of governments that are not constitutional.

Republics differ very much among themselves. There have been republics which were ruled by the well-born or the rich. These republics are called aristocracies and oligarchies. They existed in ancient Greece, in Renaissance Italy, and in eighteenth-century England. They were constitutional forms of government in which officeholders were chosen by citizens, but the citizens were a small elite based on birth or purse.

Democracy is that form of constitutional or republican government in which the many rather than the few choose the officeholders. Now, the term "many" has had various meanings down through the ages. There was a time not so long ago when women were not allowed to vote in the United States. The struggle of Negroes for the franchise still goes on in some Southern states. In ancient Greece, where the term "democracy" originated, slaves and foreigners were not allowed to vote. In Periclean Athens, the high point of Greek democracy, there were fewer than 30,000 citizens in a population of 120,000.

Even that model republic the United States restricted the franchise to free men (meaning white men) in the early days, and there were property qualifications for voting in many states. But the principle of rule by "the great body of the people" was there from the beginning; indeed, I have lifted the phrase from *The Federalist*. Alexander Hamilton and other defenders of the Constitution preferred "popular government" to monarchy, aristocracy, or oligarchy.

Some confusion has resulted from the fact that Hamilton and other Founding Fathers said they preferred a republic to a democracy. But what they meant by a republic was a representative democracy, in which the people delegate law-making and executive powers to the officeholders they elect. They preferred this to the direct action of citizens who rule *en masse* as in the ancient Greek democracies. This distinction is obsolete now, for constitutional democracies nearly always work through representatives. Represen-

tative democracy, such as we have in the United States today, is republican government.

Suffrage is now extended to all adult citizens of sound mind. Citizenship is granted to all persons born in the United States or duly naturalized. Universal suffrage is the main distinction between our democracy and that of ancient Greece and the early United States. Another basic distinction between our democracy and ancient Greek democracy is that we delegate governmental powers to officeholders instead of ruling directly through popular assemblies.

As I see it, the essence of democracy is universal suffrage, without arbitrary restrictions based on birth, property, or beliefs. This is the source of what I call “political liberty.” I think it is so important that I devote a whole section of the first volume of *The Idea of Freedom* to it.

In that work I define political liberty as a freedom conferred on men by constitutional government, and possessed only by those who are full-fledged and active members of a self-governing community. Such freedom rests on suffrage. It is essential to political liberty that the will of the individual citizen actually determines the will of the government.

Clearly, Soviet “citizens” do not possess such liberty. This is true of all of them, from Khrushchev on down. The top leaders have power, as long as they can hold it, but not liberty. I know Russia has a written constitution, but I am no more impressed by Russian claims to have the only genuine democracy than I was by Mussolini’s or Hitler’s similar claims.

13. POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Dear Dr. Adler,

I’ve heard a lot about the importance and virtue of leadership ever since I was a boy. However, I’ve never heard anything clear and definite about what a leader should be like, what the qualities of leadership are. And my experience in social clubs, military service, and as a citizen in my community has given me a rather confused and downgraded notion of leadership. What makes a man a leader? What qualities should he possess? Can we have good political leadership in a democratic form of government?

C. W. T.

Dear C. W. T.,

We may get some notion of the nature of leadership and the qualities we look for in a leader by paying attention to the various meanings that the verb “to lead” evokes in our mind. First, “to lead” means to be physically out in front, as when we refer to the *lead* car in a procession. Second, “to lead” refers to a skilled human action, as when we speak of a trained guide *leading* a party to its destination. Third, “to lead” means to have the authority to command or direct others.

The first type of leadership is often found in our community organizations, in which the leader is chosen not for any special excellence but only as a figurehead to “front” for the group. This very attenuated type of leadership is usually rotated among different members of the group.

The second type of leadership is found in educational and religious institutions. The concept of the teacher as a guide on the road to learning (see Chapter 45) is a case in point. Some religious groups refer to their heads as their “spiritual leaders.”

The third type of leadership is the kind that we look for in the political community. It has been a subject of discussion in the great books for thousands of years. You may remember that Plato wants the leader of his ideal republic to be a philosopher-king, combining all the moral and intellectual virtues, and possessing both philosophical and practical wisdom.

The aristocratic ideal of leadership—that the best man or men should govern—is an element in most ancient political theories. A certain excellence in mind and character was looked for in the men who were to lead the community. In the early forms of society, the wisdom and experience required for leadership were deemed to reside in the elders of the community.

Our experience with dictatorships in this century has made us rather leery about self-appointed leaders. The writings of Mussolini and Hitler are full of praise for the “leadership principle,” and they even chose the title of “leader” for themselves. But leaders who are above the law or are a law unto themselves abuse this principle. Political philosophers ever since Aristotle have been aware that even leadership by the best men must be limited by constitutional safeguards to prevent it from degenerating into tyranny.

Only under constitutional government, in which the leader is the first among equals, can freedom be preserved.

A special problem occurs in modern democracy with its representative form of government. Are the representatives of the people to be mere servants who follow the will of the voters who elect them, or are they to follow their own judgment on public measures? Should the representatives mold or follow public opinion?

The writers of *The Federalist* and John Stuart Mill hold that the representative should be chosen for his superior wisdom and experience, and should make his own decisions. The opposite opinion is that the winner of an election bears a mandate from the voters to carry out specific measures.

The qualities we look for in a political leader are much the same now as they have always been. He must be interested primarily in the good of the community rather than in his own advancement. He must have sound practical judgment and whatever special skill and knowledge is required for the particular task. He must have decisiveness and the courage to take the risk of being wrong or becoming unpopular. And, above all, he must have the ability to inspire trust and confidence.

One of the main obstacles to good political leadership is the reluctance of the best men to assume the burdens of public office. Writers as far back as Plato and Aristotle remark on this. Some people are of the opinion that every crisis in American history has called forth the proper leader. Washington and Lincoln are outstanding examples. Whether the present crisis will do the same remains to be seen.

14. THE RULE OF THE MAJORITY

Dear Dr. Adler,

In our political life we are always supposed to abide by the decision of the majority of the voters. But I fail to see the great virtue of majority rule. Majorities have frequently been stupidly and dangerously wrong. In Europe they backed Hitler and other totalitarian dictators. In America they have elected vicious demagogues and have supported the denial of human rights to minorities. Why should the majority rule even when it is wrong? Is the voice of the people the voice of God?

R. H.

Dear R. H.,

Let us first see what the alternatives are. What kind of rule would we have if we did not have majority rule?

Supreme power in a state may be in the hands of one man or more than one man. If you have one-man rule, you have no problem of deciding whose policy shall be carried out. You do have a problem where more than one man has a voice and there are differences of opinion. Then you have two alternatives: unanimous agreement or majority rule.

Now, we all know how difficult it is to obtain unanimity of opinion in any group of free and outspoken individuals. Such a requirement is impracticable in a political community. Furthermore, it places a veto power in the hands of a minority, even in one vote. Look how crucial decisions in the United Nations Security Council are held up by the requirement that all five permanent members must agree on matters of policy.

So you see that majority rule is a practical method of deciding things. Call it counting noses, if you like. It is used in various forms of government, in aristocracies and oligarchies as well as in democracies. Whether power resides in an elite or in the whole people, we need a show of hands among those who have a voice in order to decide which leaders and policies shall govern the community.

Political philosophers down through the ages have worried about the problem of the tyranny of the majority. John C. Calhoun, the great statesman of the pre-Civil War South, thought you could have responsible constitutional government without forcing minorities to submit to the will of the majority. He advocated giving minorities the veto power over majority decisions which affect their vital interests. Some opponents of integrated schooling in the present-day South propose basically similar devices. The trouble with this remedy, of course, is that it makes government ineffective on all crucial issues, and gives a minority the supreme power of nullification of the majority will.

The English political philosopher John Stuart Mill proposed another remedy, which has become part of electoral procedure in many countries: *proportional representation*. Mill pointed out that it was possible for a minority to attain a sizable vote and yet be without any representation in the national lawmaking body. One party may be in the minority in each political unit and yet have

thirty or forty per cent of the nation's total vote. Mill felt that "minority representation" should accompany majority rule, that the minority should have a voice, though not the supreme power. He also suggested a system of "plural voting" which would grant more votes to the more highly educated or intelligent persons.

There is no doubt that proportional representation gives a more just representation to various political convictions. But it has tended to make governments unstable, with no single party able to attain a majority. Proportional representation helped to cause the recent constitutional crisis in France.

I think we all agree that the majority should be prevented from taking away certain basic human rights. Nor should the majority be allowed to impose its religious beliefs, political convictions, or mode of life on minorities. Mill recognized that tyranny is exercised not only by government officials but also by public opinion, social custom, and "the neighbors." In the following eloquent passage, he sounded off against the creeping conformity of his own day:

There needs protection also against the tyranny of prevailing opinion and feeling; against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them. . . . There is a limit to the legitimate interference of collective opinion with individual independence; and to find that limit, and maintain it against encroachment, is as indispensable to a good condition of human affairs, as protection against political despotism.

A hundred years later, Mill's words apply with even greater force; for the dangers to freedom which he had in mind have become increasingly serious since his time.

15. LIBERALISM AND CONSERVATISM

Dear Dr. Adler,

One of the Gilbert and Sullivan works has a little ditty about everyone being born a liberal or a conservative. But what exactly is a "liberal" or a "conservative"? People tell you that someone is a liberal or a conservative, and you're supposed to applaud or boo. Just what is it you are supposed to applaud or boo?

J.H.B.

Dear J. H. B.,

In America today few of us will admit to being conservative. Most of us want to be known as liberals. Some political leaders call themselves “liberal conservatives” or “conservative liberals,” but avoid the simple “conservative” label. This situation makes it difficult to discern what people mean when they use the terms “conservative” and “liberal.”

However, if we listen attentively, we notice that most people intend by the word “liberal” an open attitude toward life and ideas, a willingness to change, a hospitality to new social arrangements. And by “conservative” they mean fixed views, attachment to old ways of social life and order, opposition to change, and general “stiffness.”


Currently we tend to associate the term “liberal” with the support of vigorous government action to ensure social and economic welfare. But in the past a liberal was a person who believed that the government should not interfere with the “natural” process of economic and social life. Liberalism advocated freedom from government interference and restraints beyond the needs of public order, decency, and defense. In European political history, liberalism supported constitutional government in opposition to absolute monarchy, and usually advocated a tolerant “pluralistic” society rather than compulsory adherence to a uniform pattern of custom and belief.

The case for traditional liberalism is stated effectively by F. A. von Hayek in his recent book *The Constitution of Liberty*. He believes that the free action and development of individuals is the best possible way to attain the common good and the fulfillment of ultimate human ideals. He opposes the imposition of any fixed form of social order, the retention of traditional privileges, and the closing off of new possibilities in the future.

Consequently, Hayek rejects both the attempt to impose a new social pattern—as in socialism, the New Deal, or the welfare state—and the deliberate attempt to retain the old order, institutions, and privileges. He believes that a free and open society is best, because no group of men knows enough to set a pattern for society or have the right to impose their view of how human affairs should be conducted. Coercion ultimately corrupts; freedom ultimately purifies.

It is difficult to distinguish this kind of liberalism from the “new conservatism” espoused by such writers as Russell Kirk and Peter Viereck. The new conservatives, too, call for a natural, “organic,” unprescribed development of the social order. They, too, are against any theoretical, consciously planned determination of the structure and future of the community.

However, they differ from Hayek in stressing the community as against the individual, social tradition and unity as against individual variation, social hierarchy and stratification as against the “open” society. They stress the accumulated wisdom embodied in traditional institutions, customs, and beliefs, and sense intuitively rather than grasp by rational thought. Liberals like Hayek, on the contrary, respect and trust human reason, and consider the new conservatism “mystical” and “obscurantist.”

The advocates of the New Deal had a different conception of what it means to be a liberal. According to them, liberalism endorses government intervention to solve critical social problems that are too big to be solved by private individuals. They maintained that it is the government’s duty to assure the basic social, economic, and political rights of all through government control and planning. They put their ultimate trust in the will of the great majority of the people, as distinguished from the judgment of a small minority. 

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