## Democracy and the climate problem

After Paris, there is naturally a lot of discussion about how the commitments made there are to be turned into effective actions. Framing this issue as one of creating or finding political will doesn't seem to me very helpful, because the formula "political will" is really just shorthand for people wanting it enough - and that, after all is exactly the problem. Saying we need political will is like saying we won't have a problem when there's no problem. It would be better to ask what's been going on in the democracies - those societies where you might expect the citizens to have responded in their ultimate best interest, because they are free to act on their own collective judgement. They pretty clearly haven't been doing this - so why not? Could it be the case, as some have alleged, that democracies are handicapped in front of a problem like this? But if so, the world's autocracies haven't done any better. Could it be that modern democracies are suffering from disorders that are limiting their response capacity? If so, what are they and can they be fixed? Or is there perhaps something special about the climate problem that makes it difficult for any system to respond to it rationally?

One of the distinctive and hopeful things about the Paris conference was its inclusion and encouragement of civil society participants - opening a space for citizen advocates and representatives and other non-offical parties to contribute and engage with the delegates. But this victory at Paris raises another question: why did it take so long for this to occur? Why were the diplomats and negotiators and political representatives acting on behalf of citizens so slack at doing what needed to be done instead of what they deemed possible? For that matter, why was success impossible?

What I'd like to explore in this essay is this issue: how come democratic societies have behaved like addicts - being informed about something dangerous and its hazards, they nonetheless chose to ignore that advice. I'm aware of many kinds of explanation, all of which have some merit. Cognitive scientists tell us about characteristics of the climate problem that make it "wicked" and hard for us to respond to. Corporate interests and ideologues have used misinformation. There appears to have been a decline of trust in science and other knowledge institutions. The scientific message is complicated and unfamiliar to most people. There is media bias, and too much lobbying. These and others are surely part of the answer. Yet it seems to me they can't be the whole. For after all, we still need to understand why, in Elizabeth Kolbert's words, "a technologically advanced society could choose, in essence, to destroy itself."[1] That is quite a puzzle. And for the "free" societies, it's even stranger because, on the face of it, those citizens could have instructed their representatives any time they wanted.

Would the climate problem become tractable if democracies could rid themselves of certain dysfunctional features? Would a hypothetical "perfect" democracy simply accept the planetary diagnosis and get right on with looking after our grandkids' future? Before trying to answer this, we'd better be clear what we're actually talking about. Democracy is, after all, a hotly contested concept.

**What is democracy?**
This innocuous question turns out to be remarkably tricky to answer, not just because contested ideologies claim a stake in it (although they do) but because it's not easy to agree exactly what kind of thing democracy is. From different points of view, it can look like a political method - a set of practices and rules for assigning and limiting executive power. Or it can be a social institution (or a group of them) enabling those practices. Or it might be something with deeper roots than this - an elaboration of some features of our human social nature, with a story that grows out of psychological and sociological, as well as historical sources.

Whatever the answer, it seems pretty clear that now is a good time to explore the matter because to even a casual observer, it's obvious that all the democracies are in trouble. Again. We should not kid ourselves about this - democracy has never had a smooth ride. As a system of government it struggled for a long time to be born, and then struggled some more to spread beyond its nursery and provide a hopeful example to all the world. And then, in the middle of last century, it very nearly died. Living in its "golden age", as we do, it's only too easy to forget that it could very well have vanished with no guarantees of rebirth; its mourners oppressed and silenced indefinitely.

And this thought is essential for a realistic approach to figuring out what we're dealing with. For if we don't acknowledge at the beginning that, whatever else it is, democracy is something fragile and constantly at odds with other impulses in our social creativity, and at the same time strangely resilient and capable of surviving prolonged adversity - we shall miss the key to understanding its present troubles.

Let me try to explain what I mean. I was born just after the peak of its mid-century crisis, in 1944. For most of my life, there was a growing sense, as the number of democracies climbed from a war-time handful to more than a hundred, that this invention was actually the fulfilment of some kind of law of progress. By the last decade of the century, that view had acquired a sort of orthodoxy. Democracy, on this view, was not just resilient, but more like a bulldozer, propelled by the logic of history to push aside old traditions as it formed the new highway that would lead as a matter of course to global democratic governance for all peoples.

And then, in just a few years, that confidence evaporated. What happened? When I think about this I always come back to something Karl Popper said, about the time I was born, when he was explaining his idea of the "open society".[2] The vast majority of human experience, he said, has been of living in small egalitarian bands. No democracy there because those people had no need of any politics. When more complex social organisations emerged a few thousand years ago, there followed some millennia of experience with social hierarchies. Of living, in other words, as subjects, either delegating or submitting to leadership. These ancient modes of social existence are, so to speak, in our marrow. And it shows in the way we respond to exertions of social and economic power. You might say the intuitions of hierarchy are all there. We just know how to

recognise leadership in a claimant, and how to behave so leadership becomes collective power.

But democracy is different. We do not know when the first stirrings of democratic ambition appeared. We do know however, it must have been long before the Athenian experiment, when, according to sparse evidence, citizens in various ancient polities began to figure out how to conduct their affairs by means of popular assemblies.

Popper's insight is that this development expresses a fundamental shift in the social condition - a new kind of awareness, both of the self, and the body politic, a new variety of social being, and a new sphere of collective action. To bring this about, people have to repudiate some part of their acquired social "instincts", the ones that guide submission, obedience and reverence for priestly and kingly authority. Choosing joint responsibility means over-riding old behaviour patterns, desires, fears and habits. Autonomy is a burden. It generates what Popper called "the strain of civilisation" - the ever present tension between our old acquiescence and our assertion of collective sovereignty. And it can be found inside each and every one of us, as well as (more obviously) in the body of the polis itself.

He used this way of thinking to help explain the lapse of his European homeland into barbarity in the 1930's; and it is surely useful in trying to understand any instance of a democratic people responding undemocratically to demagoguery. And right now, you don't need to look far to see this for yourself.

It seems to me that if Popper is right (it's only fair to say, his observation was not much more than a hunch. A lot of interesting work has been done on the subject since)[3], then we ought to be able to see evidence for his claim pretty much everywhere - including inside ourselves. And it seems to me the best place to look is where anti-democratic sentiments, beliefs or claims come to the surface of public discourse - which they do all the time. But to be quite clear, we should first ask: is there a reliable way of diagnosing anti-democratic stance in any public utterance? What does it look like?

Well, as it happens, we have very good evidence to answer this because one of the very first critics of democracy was one of the world's greatest authors and thinkers, and we have his own words to consult. I'm talking about Plato. In book VIII of The Republic, he describes in detail the grim reality of democracy as he understood it - chaotic, passionate, impulsive, even bestial. It's not a pretty picture, and Plato's immense reputation has provided this view with a good bit of leverage ever since. However, things aren't exactly what they seem.

To get an idea where Plato was coming from, we need to understand a couple of things. First, he was greatly affected by the failures of Athenian democracy in the period he knew it intimately, the decades surrounding the Peloponnesian war. He lamented deeply a series of disastrous decisions - political and tactical - that were made by the assembly. That led to his conviction that crowds can be relied upon to act on passion rather than

reason. Second, he was born an aristocrat, and no doubt inherited some degree of sympathy for an aristocrat's view of things. Third, he was analysing a society very different from a modern one. Not only was there no such thing as political representation in Athens (the city practiced a form of very direct democracy with strictly limited suffrage) but all the egalitarian ideas we're familiar with were then unknown. So Plato's thinking about what we now call social justice can't simply be grafted into a contemporary debate about the virtues and failings of democracy.

All the same, a core of Plato's attack has turned out to be very durable. This is the idea that democracy is too unstable, too irrational, and too inefficient to steer the ship of state. For this demanding job, he said, you need properly qualified people. For him, the essential qualification was wisdom; so for his ideal state, he imagined a long, rigorous program of education and preparation for those who would be entrusted with rule. Training and discipline would indemnify these autocrats against tyranny. They would govern benignly because of their superior capacity to deliberate moral and political things.

Today, we would be more inclined to see this in terms of expertise rather than wisdom. And there are good reasons for that. As societies became vastly bigger and more complex since Plato's time, so government has become impossible without droves of experts of many kinds. So far so good. But once we stop to consider just how experts ought to be admitted to the exercise of power, things get tricky. Should democratically elected representatives, for example, defer to experts or consult the people who elected them? Or should they be the brokers of a kind of dialogue in order to inject expertise into an open public debate? But experts are notoriously dismissive of such "consultation" and much prefer unilateral license and executive privilege - an undemocratic impulse if ever there was one.

Should we allow our representatives to grow into a cosy dependant relationship with the experts employed by government - a kind of governing elite which communicates with constituents by way of simplified messages crafted so as to snare vulnerable prejudices and desires? You can see by the tenor of such questions how the grounds for criticising democracy have shifted since Plato's time. We've lived with modern representative institutions long enough to take them for granted. And yet, Plato's worry is still very much with us. Consider the following words spoken by Tony Abbott, who was at the time Australia's prime minister, addressing the leaders of the 20 biggest national economies, one afternoon in Brisbane in November 2014.

"Our power and authority is circumscribed", he told the leaders, after reminding them that their gathering represented the greatest concentration of political power in the world. They were there, he went on, "to demonstrate to an uncertain and at times anxious world that there are people who know what they are doing". Yet there was this fly in the ointment. He was chaffed, as he believed they must be too, by "the limitations of our authority; the clash of policy and politics; the difficulty of trying to put good economics into practice, given the political constraints we all have."

Now this is a particular way of talking about power. In my view, it is fundamentally anti-democratic. In a democracy, the owners of sovereign power are the people. Full stop. If they elect delegates to represent them in the law-making assembly, they do not relinquish that ownership, but merely assign a kind of commission, revocable by another election, or by protest, or by any one of a number of legal or administrative or civil society practices, so the delegates may act in their best interest. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed in America in 1831, this way of exercising popular sovereignty works best if there is a lively and continual conversation between the representatives and the people over questions of what concerns their true interest. No expert can abrogate that process, but only inform it.

Tony Abbott, though, according to his words, is saying that the people grant power to the winners of an electoral contest; and his impatience is due to the fact that these executives, in one chamber were being checked in another. In his view, the political sphere is not composed of a multifarious (sometimes chaotic) and fertile debate, but a sort of single combat between two lethally opposed moral claimants. Hence his use of the phrase "good economics". The rest of us think of economics as producing technical stuff of varying quality that is more or less useful, rather than good or bad. In the same vein, when he says "people who know what they are doing", he means the electoral victors (his party) have a monopoly on truth. Being in that position, they only need to employ experts who agree with them to execute the "mandate" given to them.

It might be interesting here to reflect a moment on another statement about the nature of democracy, this time an explicit one. I put it here because to me the thought expressed seems to share something essential with Abbott's:
"The result of the revolution in Germany has been to establish a democracy in the best sense of the word. We are steering towards an order of things guaranteeing a process of a natural and reasonable selection in the domain of political leadership, thanks to which that leadership will be entrusted to the most competent…"

This of course, is Adolf Hitler, who didn't mind explaining his views about democracy plainly. To him it was nonsense to think an undisciplined mob could possibly govern. The natural order of things is for the masses to endorse a competent elite. His idea of the Fuhrer was more like what we would call a demagogue than a tyrant, but that didn't stop the two roles merging soon after his assumption of power. And that, of course, is exactly what democracies are meant to fix.

Power is always and everywhere, corruptive. Plato knew that perfectly well. That's why he carefully prescribed a program to make his philosopher-rulers both competent and resistant to temptation. We're not even sure he continued to believe in the efficacy of his prescription to the end of his days, but be that as it may, with our experience of modern times, we could hardly be as confident as Plato seems to have been that you could create incorruptible leaders by educating them. On the contrary, scepticism on this point was uppermost in the minds of the men who worked for years to design a constitution for the world's first large republic, the United States of America. They didn't doubt the need

for a governing elite, but they tried hard to make it subject to the constraints of popular will. In other words, for them, the political problem wasn't how to make rulers wise, but how to keep them both representative of, and responsive to the sovereign people.

Keep this in mind and you have a useful litmus test for covert anti-democratic talk coming from erstwhile democratic politicians. If they think power is the prize given to the winner of an electoral contest; if they think their opponents and all the people who voted for them are effectively excluded from decisions made by government; if they think victory brings a warrant for a program monopoly, as well as the right to use the privileges of power to ensure its continuance; if they seem unduly keen to employ the arts of persuasion rather than the skill of debate; if they speak of mandates instead of compromise; if they seek to suppress dissent rather than to hear it - then you will know these people are confused about who actually owns a democracy. There's no more fundamental mistake than that.

And if you think about this a moment you might see why Karl Popper thought there was something to explain about how democracies get into trouble. If ostensibly democratic politicians are always getting mixed up about this, and as well, they can get lots of democratic citizens to vote for them, there must be something more going on than plain old power-hunger. These politicians are not all just bullies (although some are). Many are people of conviction with a strong sense of the rightness of their cause, not interested in naked power so much as instrumental power - the means to get things done. But democracy has a very distinctive approach to this. You would think it would be thoroughly understood by democratic citizens and those who aspire to represent them, but it's not. As it's not dead simple to explain, I'll let John Keane, one of the most articulate explainers, do it for me.

"The exceptional thing about the type of government called democracy is that it demanded people see that nothing which is human is carved in stone, that everything is built on the shifting sands of time and place, and that therefore they would be wise to build and maintain ways of living together as equals, openly and flexibly. Democracy required that people see through talk of gods and nature and claims to privilege based on superiority of brain or blood.
Democracy meant the denaturing of power.
It implied that the most important political problem is how to prevent rule by the few, or by the rich or powerful who claim to be supermen. Democracy solved this old problem by standing up for a political order that ensured that the matter of who gets what, when and how should be permanently an open question. Democracy recognised that although people are not angels or gods or goddesses, they were at least good enough to prevent some humans from thinking they were."[4]

The denaturing of power. Interesting idea. To a Prince, power means exertion - what allows you to do things to others. To him, the monopoly of power by some agent, and its exercise over subjects are both affirmations of a natural order, whether power is coercive or contractual, absolute or negotiated. But to a democrat, power means a mode

of being. The citizen assumes a duty of common purpose with their fellows, an open-ended venture of discovering the common good together and figuring out how to pursue it. When democratic citizens elect legislators they don't abdicate this duty, but merely give a temporary and provisional grant for the sake of efficiency. They expect, as a right, to remain engaged in a shifting scene of problems and agendas, and to be kept informed. This power, in other words, is not a term of social relations, but a condition of life experienced by each and every citizen themselves, in their own way.

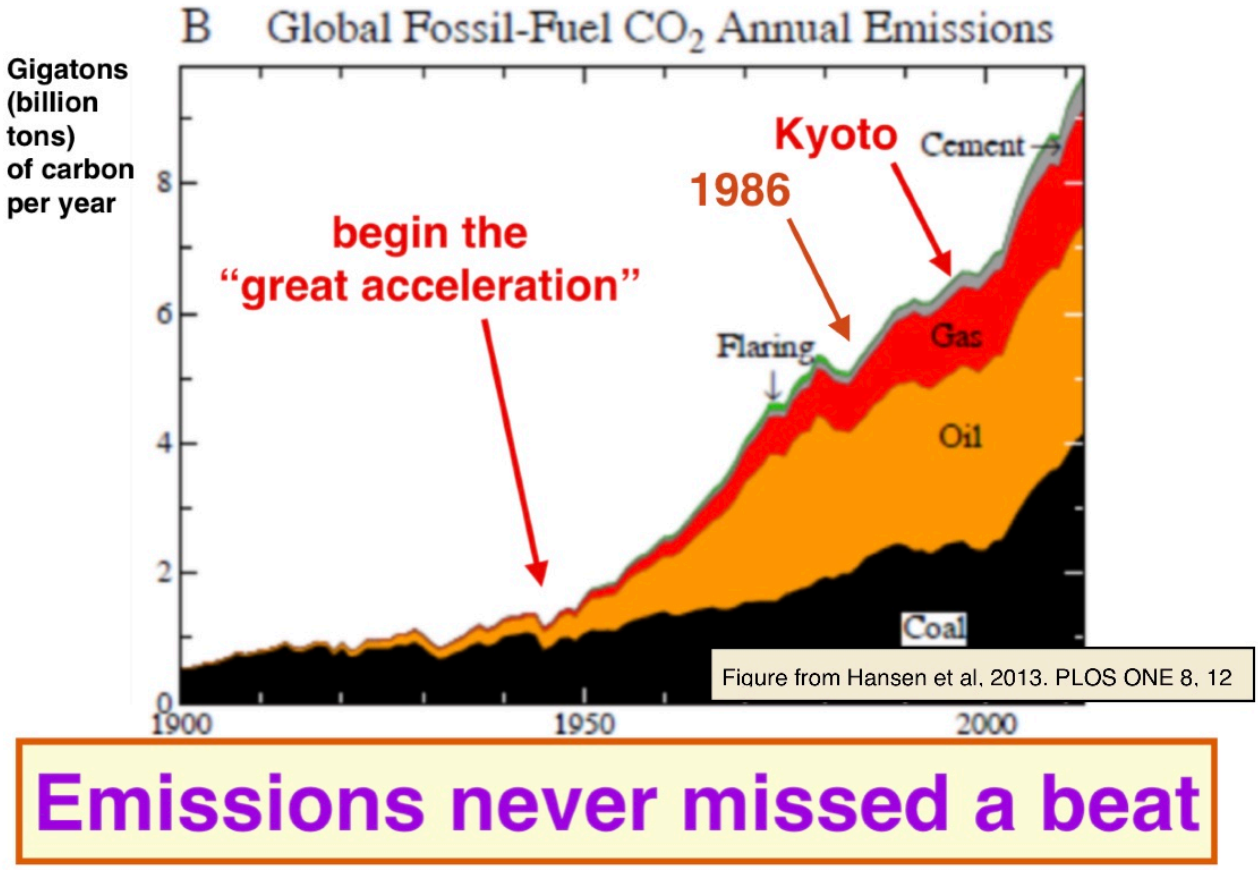
This is like saying what many students of democracy have said: that democracy is not so much a system as a way of life. Democratic citizens are committed to a shared experience as much as they are to a principle. That is surely why they seem to understand perfectly well when democratic practice is not working as it should. When asked about this, people don't talk about principles at all, but about whether they feel included, or otherwise, and whether their representatives appear to have forgotten their first duty, which is to make citizens "present" in the places where their interests are supposed to be upheld.

And trying to understand how democratic dysfunction arises, it's as well to keep Popper's insight in view - otherwise we end up blaming a cast of actors like big corporations, campaign donors, publicists & propaganda specialists, media, the lobby industry, and many institutional failures. All these are surely relevant. But none of them could be so effective if they didn't have leverage on our very own deep ambivalence about democratic responsibility. In other words, we absolutely must confront the awkward fact of democracy's vulnerability to our own contrary impulses. We have to be able to say fearlessly that there are no pure democrats. Everyone has within themselves that which can respond to a demagogue, a pre-democratic self who can have apathy or self-interest or prejudice or jingoism even hatred turned on by a leadership claimant. "Follow me", they murmur, "join us and be strong." No one is totally deaf to this.

**The climate problem in a democracy**

Just to reiterate: the puzzle in front of us is simply stated, even though it is big and complicated ... if the threat of unmanaged climate change is so serious and well understood (which it is) why have societies, including democracies, done little about it except talk? Perhaps the most concrete way to imagine the enigma is to look at this record of global fossil fuel emissions over the last century - specially the last 30 years.[5]

The graph shows a modest rise for a half century, then an accelerated one, in roughly three phases - steeply from the end of the war until the 1973 oil shock; then after a short pause, a slightly slower rise until the end of the century; then a very steep rise until the present. The idea of the "great acceleration" is due to analysis of a number of convergent trends beginning around 1950 which signal an enormous leap in human economic activity. It can be seen just as clearly by tracing GDP, or industrial production, or population, energy and material consumption, or a dozen other indicators of the extraordinary bonanza that most people younger than me understand to be normal




conditions of life. But this is not normal at all; in terms of the planet's long story, it's unique. This graphic record is a simple way of showing how very untypical our time really is, when billions of people live in a manner that would have excited the envy of emperors and kings not so very long ago.

Look closely, and you can see the decade of the 1970's when the price of a barrel of oil rose from $3 to $27, and how this only slowed consumption for a few years, then slightly slowed the rate of growth for the next twenty. Safe to say, this is evidence that oil is a very desired commodity, since the global economic system got used to paying nine times as much for it in less than a decade. The last and steepest part of the curve is due to the very fast industrialisation of China, mostly fuelled by coal.

Now recall that in 1986, exactly 30 years ago, at a formal US congressional hearing involving scientists and a committee of the congress, James Hansen said this:
"In the region of the United States the warming, 30 years from now [will be] about 1.5°C ... At high latitudes, the warming [will be] as large as 4°C."
And he was dead right.

The scientists meeting in congress that day, even with 1980's computing and a lot less knowledge of the climate system, knew enough to make pretty accurate predictions and explain to law-makers the magnitude of risk entailed. The congressmen for their part, according to the record, appear to have been genuinely engaged and keen to understand. But you can see how the emissions trajectory for the last 30 years shows no effect

whatsoever due to that learning event in the congress, and none either following the Kyoto protocol in 1997. Until Paris, this was the only serious attempt to convert all those words into deeds - and in fact there was quite a lot of action - it just didn't accomplish what the words promised.

This pattern of dissonance between what we clearly know we must do and what we actually do can be seen wherever you look for it. You might call it Elizabeth Kolbert's enigma because it looks exactly like choosing to destroy ourselves. It has been repeated in every democracy, large and small, rich and poor. In fact, the world's biggest and richest democracy turned into the biggest saboteur of global response.

In the rest of the essay, I'm going to try to show how this can be. I will take the view that an effective democracy requires certain conditions of society to be present. If they exist, the people can form capable collective judgements and resolutions; if not, they will be easily preyed upon by demagogues and persuaded to act, or neglect to act against their true interest. The reason for this contrast, I assume, is the fact pointed out by Popper, that democracy is a state of acquiescence - a compact in which the civil society undertakes to be collectively responsible for its own governance, relying on those capacities in every citizen that make it possible for us to achieve large cooperative ends without compulsion. But that acquiescence can be withdrawn at any time because inside us all, alongside a democrat there lives a tribesman who can be summoned by an appeal or blandishment only too readily.

**What are the necessary conditions for democracy?**
This has been the subject of much investigation, and a full answer would be too long to attempt here. I shall focus on three.
• The people must feel themselves to be one. Together, either through biological or cultural continuity, or shared history, resulting in a sufficiently strong sense of common identity and purpose.
• The people need to make some kind of commitment to the goal of popular sovereignty. It isn't enough to vote once in a while; there have to be a number of modes of active participation - the more the better. Citizens have to know their responsibility, and to rejoice in the exercise of it.
• There needs to be a public space in which to cultivate citizenship - a locus of reliable information to support sound deliberation, a forum for debate, the leisure to gather and report as many sources of insight and advice as necessary, and confidence in the integrity of information providers.

In addition, a working democracy needs functional institutions, those that enable the rule of law. Without these conditions, a democracy suffers a loss of legitimacy - that is, citizens lose confidence in the machinery of government, and begin to see officials (elected and appointed) playing institutional games instead of representing them.
Let's take them one at a time and see if we can decide how healthy our democracy is.

**First: unity**

It was remarked by some observers in 2003 that the mission to bring democracy to Iraq "at the point of a gun" was doomed. Senior American politicians spoke as if all that was needed was to hold a triumphal election after evicting the dictator and all would be well. But wise people understood very clearly that in a country as bitterly divided as Iraq, an elected assembly would inevitably focus and magnify partisan conflict, turning itself into a reward machine for the electoral victors. To the extent this happens in any democracy whatsoever, it is anti-democratic - something that Tony Abbott, for one, clearly did not understand. The assembly has to see itself as responsible to all citizens. Too much rancour, and that becomes impossible.

Popular sovereignty seems to entail political parties, even if we might sometimes regret that it does. Certainly, the American founding fathers saw the formation of parties as a problem - but they happened anyway, and we've lived with them ever since. Parties have an enabling role insofar as they support programs of political action, and in doing so, provide clear alternatives for public consideration and preference. But they should never override the elementary purpose of the assembly - to create a venue in which representatives make their constituents "present". In our country, when the people vote, they do so in order to elect a parliament. But to hear the contestants speak, you would think we go to the ballot to choose a prime minister, or a party, or an ideology, or a bunch of "policies". That is a fundamental mistake.

When we talk of "left" and "right" we are vaguely remembering the French revolution, when the new revolutionary assembly split into factions. And while we continue to use the terms of that far off turbulent time, we should keep in mind how the causes and motives of division have evolved, and continue to evolve. Political left and right don't mean what they did just 50 years ago; and if they are still in use in another fifty, they will certainly be different again. A couple of years before the revolution, the whole subject of factions was explored with great distinction by Alexander Hamilton and James Madison as background for the ratification of the US constitution. What concerned them was the potential for factions (what we would call parties), either majority or minority, to divert the representatives from the job of deliberating in the interests of the whole public.

Madison put it this way in 1787:
If factions come to dominate, he said, "... the public good is disregarded in the conflicts of rival parties, and ... measures are too often decided, not according to the rules of justice and the rights of the minor party, but by the superior force of an interested and overbearing majority."[6]

This should sound familiar, because it is exactly what happens all the time in our parliaments. But why, in an age of general prosperity and universal suffrage, do we have vehemently opposed parties at all? Many people suspect the parties are just making up most of what they argue about, and that they are really much closer on essentials than they admit. Furthermore, the urgent problems of contemporary societies are not about

political principles at all, but matters where a great deal of empirical data can be brought to bear on their definition, and remedies can be debated to a great extent as questions of fact. But instead we see these problems rendered as "value" conflicts; in consequence they are routinely neglected and mismanaged. So what's going on?

Consider the following two paragraphs:
"The national Democratic Party is immoral to the core. Any American who would vote for Democrats is guilty of fostering the worst kind of degeneracy. The leaders of this party are severely out of touch with mainstream, traditional American values. They are crusaders for perversion, for licentiousness, for nihilism and worse."
"Republicans don't believe in the imagination, partly because so few of them have one, but mostly because it gets in the way of their chosen work, which is to destroy the human race and the planet. Human beings, who have imaginations, can see a recipe for disaster in the making; Republicans, whose goal in life is to profit from disaster and who don't give a hoot about human beings, either can't or won't."[7]

What you see here is the thing we usually call a culture-war, but it is really just a society that has inflicted a sickness on itself, deciding to divide into two irreconcilable pieces and conduct something like civil war without shooting (not yet, anyway). The earnest combatants tell us all the time this is a vital conflict concerning essential values and principles in which everything is at stake. And yet, when it comes down to explaining those principles in detail, they turn out to be remarkably feeble. After listening to this a while, most of us on the side-lines get a strong feeling they are generating the passion themselves. In other words, this is prejudice, not principle. That would make the culture-war just like plenty of other wars - but it means nothing can be resolved by deliberation and reasoned argument, only by fighting. Just what James Madison worried about.

Loyalists in the culture-war deplore everything about their enemies. To them it seems self-evident that the best thing to do for the country is to keep the others out of office, and to use the privileges of office to continue in power as long as possible. But this, of course is the behaviour of plutocrats, not democrats, using the methods of bigotry, not persuasion. And it's only too clear where it leads - to paralysis.

Back at the end of the 18th century, when a roughly bi-polar political landscape first emerged, the anti-revolutionary forces developed two distinct approaches, both of which we would today call conservative. One, a monarchist reaction, contained both nostalgic royalists and militant catholic absolutists like de Maistre. The other came to be associated with the great Edmund Burke - what we now call classical conservatism. To Burke, it was obvious that societies evolve, and therefore the task of governments is to carefully assess necessary change and manage it so that benefits are available to the whole society. You can think of this a bit like gardening. Classical conservatives are impressed by the organic character of human social life - the way valuable things are accumulated gradually and incorporated into the fabric of a people's collective experience. They believe governors must give due weight to these continuities while they supervise the various transitions that inevitably come with progress.

In a fascinating essay published a few years ago, Sam Tanenhaus[8] explained how these two conservative traditions are still very much with us today, and how, for the time being the Burkean one has been eclipsed by something more sinister - a revanchist, backward-looking cultural conservatism with strong authoritarian, anti-democratic overtones. You don't have to look far to see what he means. Hard conservatism like this is scary because of its obvious relationship with totalitarianism, something which no one who has lived in the twentieth century needs to be reminded about. What makes this development hard to manage is that its particular form today is due to its interbreeding with corporate capitalism, a force that has inserted itself into democratic systems at many levels, gravely weakening them.

There appear to be many reasons this has happened, but a couple of things are clear: it was not inevitable, but due to choices we have made. You might say (with justice) that it is really the interaction of a series of potent technological changes, and the way such big innovations always bring unintended and unforeseeable consequences. But just because we didn't understand the implications of our choices at the time we made them, it doesn't follow we can't mend them when we do. And it ought to be possible to repair the relation between corporate power and democratic governance so that popular sovereignty works better. That brings us to the second condition for democracy.

**Participation**

How is it possible for a mass of people to possess a common will? We can imagine a family or a room-full in agreement, but millions? And if there could be no such thing as a coherent purpose for a modern national population, how can there be meaningful democratic decision-making? This question famously bamboozled Rousseau when he tried to explain how popular government worked. And it was an insurmountable problem for Walter Lippmann in 1921 when he wrote a pungent criticism of the naive concept of democracy, claiming the whole idea of the sovereign "public" is false.

To Lippmann, Plato's objection was final. Individual citizens can never know enough, and the glue that binds communities is not good enough to generate competent collective decisions. To make things worse, modern developments have created such complexity, and the structure of societies has fractured and atomised, so that the people are (through no fault of theirs) in a state of functional ignorance that disqualifies them from responsibility for the polis. There is nothing for it, Lippmann insisted, we must have a class of professionals to run things. At the time he wrote, American democracy was certainly in trouble, and his diagnosis was incisive and revealing. But what about his remedy? Should participation of democratic citizens be limited for their own good, or should it be nurtured by building their capacity, as Jefferson believed?

The most telling answer to Lippmann was provided by John Dewey in several publications during the 1920's. Their debate is fascinating in the way it discloses the far-reaching consequences of choosing either Plato's view of democracy as a flawed system, or John Keane's view that it is a commitment by a people to "the denaturing of power".

It's all too easy to find defects in the working of democratic systems - there has never been one that ran like clockwork; but once you see democracy as an aspiration with its roots in something deep in our human social nature, it looks different. Then, acknowledging its shortcomings isn't a reason for despair, but a stimulus for creativity. And that is where the issue of participation becomes critical. For Dewey took a view that would have been approved by Thomas Jefferson - basically, that we can never exhaust all the ways to promote and cultivate citizenship. It is pointless to draw a line somewhere, and say that is the limit of the public's capacity for popular government. Any instance of wayward collective decision can be met with one of collective wisdom. We cannot know what the limits of cooperation are, but we can be committed to making a society in which the flourishing of each and every citizen is its chief goal.

The Lowy Institute has asked its respondents this question for the last four years: do you think democracy is preferable to any other form of government? Consistently, about 35-40% of Australian adults don't assent to this. Among 18-29 year olds, the fraction is about 60%.[9] When asked for their reasons, people name all the usual ones, clustered around the sense of exclusion - the very common feeling that democracy isn't working because things are being run somewhere else, by people who don't speak to us truthfully, and don't want us to get involved (even though they want our vote). There's any amount of evidence that this perception is perfectly accurate - including a fascinating study done by two Princeton researchers who showed precisely how little influence civil society groups have on legislative outcomes when they are opposed by powerful economic elites.[10]

Is citizen participation then a dead duck? A victim of the take-over of the political sphere by corporate influence and money and massive professional lobbying? Well, no. Nothing about the present deplorable state of political representation is obligatory. Citizens have not yielded one bit of their constitutional identity; they still own the government. And they can assert their ownership any time they want - cleanse the temple and rebuild the kind of continuous productive dialogue with their representatives that so impressed Alexis de Tocqueville when he witnessed it in Jacksonian America in 1831. Above all, it was the very willing and dutiful participation in the life of their communities and the constant, self-conscious exercise of citizenship that struck him forcefully.

Writing of the restless, energetic enthusiasm of the Americans for their republican government, Tocqueville gives us a glimpse of what an active civil society looked like in those simpler days.

"No sooner do you set foot upon American soil than you are stunned by a type of tumult ... A confused clamour is heard everywhere, and a thousand voices simultaneously demand the satisfaction of their social needs. Everything is in motion around you ... Here the people of one town district are meeting to decide upon the building of a church; there the election of a representative is taking place; a little farther on, the delegates of a district are hastening to town in order to consult about some local improvements; elsewhere, the labourers of a village quit their ploughs to deliberate upon

a road or public school project ... Citizens call meetings for the sole purpose of declaring their disapprobation of the conduct of government; while in other assemblies citizens salute the authorities of the day as the fathers of their country …"[11]

Remote as this sounds to us jaded and excluded 21st century citizens, people who take the trouble to build working relations with their elected representatives find that routinely, political office holders are grateful and interested in productive dialogue with constituents. Such experiences seem to confirm that most politicians enter their vocation well-motivated, and that much of their perplexing behaviour is due to dysfunctional systems rather than their venal corruption. But, having said so, it remains true that culture-war rivalry is very corrosive to the principle of representation, so constituents can find themselves permanently and irrevocably off-side with their man in the capital - when their only recourse is at the ballot box.

We cannot know, of course, how things will turn out, but we do know that the age of digital communication has given us many new and interesting ways to be engaged citizens. Many thoughtful people believe this may be the means of saving democracy - the development of new forms of civil society activism through creative use of technologies. It may be that this is optimistic; it is possible that this potential will be stolen by anti-democrats or subverted. The task of measuring the forces at work in something so complicated and obscure as a modern society is simply beyond any of us - so the outcome is unknowable. But it is surely not naive to recommend vigorous use of the new community-creating tools in the hope that they turn out to be the friends that democracy has been looking for.

**Third, information**

"No experiment can be more interesting than that we are now trying, and which we trust will end in establishing the fact, that man may be governed by reason and truth. Our first object should therefore be, to leave open to him all the avenues to truth. The most effectual hitherto found, is the freedom of the press. It is, therefore, the first shut up by those who fear the investigation of their actions."[12]

So wrote Thomas Jefferson in 1804 - a man who thought the two essential pillars of a citizen-led government were free and responsible newspapers, and universal education. Jefferson's vision was not the one derided by all the anti-democrats who followed Plato - the false claim that people are wise and good enough to govern themselves - it's the defensible one that democracy is necessary because no man can be trusted with absolute power over others. The way to make men capable of self-government is to so arrange things that everyone can become the best they can be. We need democracy because it's the answer to the problem of power; but we can't have democracy without making ourselves worthy. The refugee Thomas Mann, in an 1938 essay, put this precisely: "We must define democracy as that form of government and of society which is inspired above every other with the feeling and consciousness of the dignity of man."[13]

A moment's reflection shows that this is another way of seeing Karl Popper's thought. If every citizen can be a responsible sovereign, and can also be a dubious or unwitting slave, then a central question for democrats is how to encourage (if not guarantee) the first, and preclude (or at least inhibit) the second.

Why do we have a problem of power? Do chimpanzees have one? No. Why not? Because they don't have intuitions about justice like ours. They surely understand reciprocity in practice, but not the keen sense of fairness that humans learn from the age of seven or eight and keep all their lives. We don't need history to explain that absolute sovereigns prevent most of their subjects from achieving most of their potential. We just know in our bones that we could be better off if we rebelled. That's exactly why all autocrats need force of different kinds to sustain their power.

So a democracy needs a school - a space where citizens learn the craft of citizenship, cooperative habits, deliberation, empathy, tolerance, forbearance (because democratic decision-making can test the patience), trust (as well as suspicion) and faith in the capacity of their community. The essential nutrient for this growth is information. That is why the concept of the "fourth estate" arose in the post-revolutionary era (sometimes attributed to Edmund Burke) - the idea that in a system of elected representatives, there has to be a reliable, disinterested apparatus for producing and disseminating critical information. Without this, neither electors nor legislators can do their work.

Of course, as Jefferson observed, dictators know this too. That's why they always want to control both the press and the schools. And when we look around at the public space today, where all that information gathering and sharing should be going on, what do we see? The scene is too familiar to need description - the replacement of discourse with slogans; journalists turned into propagandists; shameless offical mendacity; neglect of urgent problems; exploitation of self-interest and other base motives. This is not abandonment, but pollution. It is like a cancer in the lungs of democracy. People understand perfectly the insult that is done to them. It is the immediate reason for their defection. Let us then ask, like the physician, what manner of disease this is, and what can be done.

On looking closer, a striking fact appears. The climate problem existed in the public space for quite a while before it became infected by the culture war. So called 'movement' conservatives have been uneasy about environmentalism at least since the publication of Rachel Carson's Silent Spring in 1962. Their sense of outrage was captured by Dixie-Lee Ray who went to the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 as a concerned observer. "Mankind", she told an interviewer, "is considered (by the radical environmentalists) the lowest and meanest of all species and is blamed for everything."[14] This is really an expression of the perpetual tension between ecology and economy, and her deep offence at the idea that the human world is fully contained by the natural one; that our sense of mastery over nature is a dangerous illusion.

Interestingly, though, US President George H W Bush was also at Rio, signed the framework convention, and spoke the following: " ... the idea of sustaining the planet so that it may sustain us is as old as life itself. We must leave this earth in better condition than we found it, and today this old truth must be applied to new threats facing the resources which sustain us all, the atmosphere and the ocean, the stratosphere and the biosphere. Our village is truly global." The US enacted the world's first environmental protection laws and agencies in the 1970's, successfully reduced pollution in air and waters, regulated fisheries and forests, led the way to an ozone treaty, and by the time of the Earth summit, had created a strong body of research on the changing climate. But after that, something changed. It's probably no exaggeration to say that serious poisoning of the public space on climate change can be traced precisely to that moment when Dixie-Lee Ray returned from Rio believing the United Nations environmentalists were stooges of "the International Socialist Party".

Others were worried too. Although the President was apparently perfectly sincere in his wish to manage the world's ecological problems, he made it clear his country wanted management to be in the hands of business rather than government. And managing the climate problem very much engaged the interest of the most powerful businesses on Earth. It soon came about that these commercial actors (mostly fossil fuel corporations) and fearful conservatives began together to build a sophisticated propaganda machine for the ultimate purpose of preventing or delaying a global response to the problem.[15]

It has been only too successful. Today we celebrate if a survey finds the percentage of people who believe there's a problem goes up a couple of points. But the level of concern in our societies is feeble. Most citizens have no idea how this threatens life on Earth and future people - including their own descendants. Neither concern nor understanding are a match for the magnitude and scope of this immense catastrophe. If our acknowledgement were appropriate, it would be the top priority of everyone. Instead, latent doubt (who wants to know about a depressing problem that's going to require some loss of familiar comforts to fix it?) has been magnified into a solid movement of flat denial of what would otherwise be a normal scientific discovery. In this process, an absurd case has been hatched out of nothing, against not just one or two, but the entire community of scientists investigating the problem. The reluctance of elected officials to engage constituents in a conversation about necessary adjustments and costs has been leveraged into policy denial too.

That crucial space that ought to be full of quality information about this most pressing contemporary issue is instead an echo chamber full of confusion and rancour. For politicians, this would be daunting at any time, but under the conditions created by this perverse campaign, it is well-nigh impossible. The cause? According to Oreskes & Conway, it is some combination of commercial self-interest and 'ideological' fervour. But it would surely not have succeeded if it hadn't found the right anti-democrat buttons to press. It might be called the gravest use of propaganda in all human experience. An achievement like Dr Goebbels' but much grander, and accomplished in the richest, best educated free society that has ever existed. In its aftermath, there is now a troubling

growth of distrust in science, and indeed in all expertise, a reversion to magical modes of thinking and a free pass for any number of ignorant and bigoted partisans. We have done this to ourselves.

**What next?**

If my diagnosis looks grim, I confess I cannot think of any way to make it less so. Plenty of optimistic proposals float around, mostly versions of the story that we can convert the energy system into a green one and get right on with making everyone more and more prosperous. Some folks think this massive change could be simply induced by legislating the right kind of tax on carbon emitted to the air; then the market would do all the work for us. Some think a big enough popular movement is what we need - something that could muscle the bad guys aside and force the policy-makers' hands. Still others see technology saving us. If only we got really busy inventing stuff, we'd soon find the secret of perpetual riches and a benign regime between us and the Earth too.

I've wondered a lot about this, vacillating between hope and despair, but always returning to one stubborn fact: the biosphere is being asked to sustain a human enterprise which is orders of magnitude larger than any other agency on the planet's surface. Economic managers haven't come close to understanding this, insisting the world is working just the same as it did when there was lots and lots of it untouched by us, and we had every reason to think we could keep extractive systems going for ever.

But if the global economy is unsustainable (in the straightforward sense that it can't keep going) - which it certainly is - then would a green one the same size be any better? The answer to this is also quite clear from ecological footprint studies and analyses of dynamic system behaviour. We cannot simply replace one mode of consumption with another; bandage one planetary boundary and ignore the rest. The compelling reason, I've come to believe, is that our unforgiving economic system forbids it.

I'm not competent to discuss economics, but this is how economic historian Richard Smith sees it. He argues "that the problem is rooted in the requirements of capitalist reproduction, that large corporations are destroying life on earth, that they can't help themselves, they can't change or change very much, that so long as we live under this system we have little choice but to go along in this destruction, to keep pouring on the gas instead of slamming on the brakes, and that the only alternative -- impossible as this may seem right now -- is to overthrow this global economic system and all of the governments of the 1% that prop it up, and replace them with a global economic democracy, a radical bottom- up political democracy, an ecosocialist civilization."[16]

Smith and others insist that corporate capitalism, the system that has given us our fantastic wealth and comfort, derives its vitality from two contradictory impulses that have always coexisted - its incredible creativity and its boundless appetite. As long as these twins could be occupied in a spacious world of opportunity, we had no need to worry. But now that limits are appearing everywhere, the absolute commitment of capitalism to growth is a massive and insurmountable problem. On this view,

corporations are themselves a problem. They have acquired so many of the legal attributes of persons that they've taken up residence in most of our institutions and helped themselves to slices of cake right alongside the people whom they were meant to serve. Trouble is, they are psychopaths, with enormous muscles, cavernous guts and no conscience at all. They should always have been kept safely where they can be good servants, and never allowed in the dining room. But there we are.

What's to be done? Well, Smith and others think capitalism has to go. This is not really satisfactory though because, as he admits readily, we really have no idea what could replace it - a system that could keep us in decent comfort and also spread wealth a lot more equitably. At least there is an ecosocialist movement working on it. Others - Herman Daly most prominently - believe we can develop a tamed version of capitalism that can work without growth in its material and energy throughputs. Daly imagines a kind of non-material growth of quality that would eventually serve the goal of global equity.[17] Only thing is, a 'steady-state economy' is still hypothetical. It exists in books, to help us dream, but we really do not know if it will ever work.

British writer and academic Geoff Mulgan believes the two sides of capitalism, its creativity and its predation have always required regulation, so there is actually plenty of historical experience to guide us in what ought to be our aim - to harvest the fruit of capitalism's inventiveness and restless energy, while restraining its avarice and inequality. Mulgan makes an interesting case that this project is already underway in many and various forms - though that by no means guarantees its success.[18]

The perplexity of experts is the same as yours and mine. We all want to find a way to turn our concern into action that works. Human moral capacity means that each and every one of us - youthful activists, grandparents like me, and the toughest oil man, all want good things to happen rather than bad ones. On the whole, the desire of everyone for the welfare of their grandkids is pretty much the same. Most bad stuff doesn't happen because the world is full of bad people, but because all people can do bad things under some circumstances. When we're trying to figure out what to do, we ought to be thinking about how to make better systems - the institutions that we use to get things done - because most of the time, they provide the conditions that steer us toward the better angels of our nature, or the worse.

Would it be better to confront the climate problem in a democracy or in something else? If you can ask yourself this question, and honestly answer for democracy, then (assuming you live in one) you only have to reach for it, and your citizenship and all its potential is with you always. From my own modest experience of exploring this potential, I can say, first, that it is only limited by one's determination and inventiveness. There may be an intractable limit to the present malaise of democracy, but I'm pretty sure no one has found it yet. Second, though it might sometimes feel lonely, the community of concerned citizens is vast. Everyone is not being crushed by bad news. Good will, good ideas and energy are everywhere. Third, building direct, productive, enduring relations with our elected representatives works. Certainly, there are exceptions,

but most of them want and need this because they know that without it, they can't do their real job.

Finally, it's worth saying, even if a bit obvious, that this thing that's broken belongs to us. Maybe we didn't break it, but our neglect will surely keep it from getting fixed. If we, the people do not get busy, work out what to do and start repairing it, who will? No one can doubt that corporations, those abstract legal inventions we use to do business, have bred a race of giants, and found their way into our institutions of law-making, administration and even justice - creations of ours that were intended for the use of moral persons - and, like tumours, by being in the wrong place, they have become debilitating to our democracies. This being so, we can agree with Yale law professor Lawrence Lessig when he said although money in politics isn't our most important problem, it is the first problem, because if it isn't fixed nothing else will be.

As far as I know, everyone who faces the facts of human ecology without flinching, will be in for an emotional roller-coaster. For what it's worth, I'd like to end on a positive note - suggestive, rather than up-beat. It's Richard Smith's assessment of what may turn out to be the 'new democracy', what John Keane calls monitory democracy - where a multitude of self-organised independent civil society nodes of power act on the processes of government, as provocateurs, advisors, monitors, and partners.

"We may be fast approaching the precipice of ecological collapse, but the means to derail this train wreck are in the making as, around the world, struggles against the destruction of nature, against dams, against pollution, against overdevelopment, against the siting of chemical plants and power plants, against predatory resource extraction, against the imposition of GMOs, against privatization of remaining common lands, water and public services, against capitalist unemployment and precarité are growing and building momentum. Today we're riding a swelling wave of near-simultaneous global mass democratic "awakening," almost global mass uprising. This global insurrection is still in its infancy, still unsure of its future, but its radical democratic instincts are, I believe, humanity's last best hope. Let's make history!"[19]

## Notes

[1] Kolbert, E 2006 Field Notes from a Catastrophe. Bloomsbury, New York. p 189

[2] Popper, K 1945 The Open Society and its Enemies. Routledge, London. Ch 10

[3] The issue can be formulated various ways, for example: are humans naturally cooperative, or competitive? How, if at all, is democracy embedded in our social habits, experience and intuitions? What can be found in human psychology to correspond to democratic or egalitarian impulses and ambitions? Investigations such as those of anthropologist and primatologist Christopher Boehm strongly suggest that Popper was right insofar as our species history has provided us with built-in means of living in both politics-free (egalitarian) bands, and hierarchical power systems, and that, depending on certain contingent factors, a society that chooses one or the other must perform a balancing act, encouraging one part of its moral inheritance, and suppressing another. See Boehm, C, 2012; Moral Origins. Basic Books. Other scholars have given us valuable insights with which to tackle questions about how moral capacity operates in societies. See, for example, Haidt, J, 2013. The Righteous Mind: why good people are divided by politics and religion. Vintage, New York.

[4] Keane, J 2009 The Life and Death of Democracy. Simon Schuster, London. xii

[5] Hansen et al, 2013. PLOS ONE, 8, 12, e81684

[6] The Federalist Number 10. Modern Library paperback 2001, p 54

[7] These two are cited at the head of Graham, Nosek, Haidt, 2012. PLOS ONE 7; 12 e50092

[8] Tanenhaus, S, 2009 The New Republic, February 18th

[9] The Lowy Institute 2015 http://www.lowyinstitute.org/files/final_2015_lowy_institute_poll.pdf

[10] Gilens & Page, 2014. Perspectives on Politics, 12, 3; 564-581

[11] Tocqueville, A, Democracy in America. Everyman's Library 1994

[12] Jefferson; letter to John Tyler

[13] Mann, Thomas, 1938. The Coming Victory of Democracy

[14] Interviewed at The Acton Institute, 1992

[15] This movement has been dissected in great detail in: Oreskes & Conway, 2010. Merchants of Doubt. Bloomsbury, New York

[16] Smith, R, 2013 Capitalism and the Destruction of Life on Earth: six theses on saving the humans. Real World Economic Review #64 125-151

[17] Daly, H 2015 Economics for a full World. http://www.greattransition.org/publication/economics-for-a-full-world. And Daly, H 1996 Beyond Growth. Beacon Press, Boston

[18] Mulgan, G 2013 The Locust and the Bee: predators and creators in capitalism's future. Princeton University Press

[19] Smith, R 2013 ibid.