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**Ambivalence, Democracy & Disappointment**

Lord John Alderdice

The first generation of psychoanalysts quickly saw that the insights they were acquiring in working with individuals had much wider application to society as a whole (Freud, S, 1930, Jones, E, 1924, 1964). Their optimism for the outcomes of the treatment of patients mirrored the high hopes of liberals and the political left for society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was a period when there was a significant expansion in the idea of democracy as an ideal, especially in Europe and North America.

However, The Great War of 1914-1918 had a paradoxical effect. On the one hand, the sacrifices of so many ordinary people and the increased involvement of women in employment outside the home that had been required by the war effort, spurred on the process of democratization. Empires began to unstitch, and people looked increasingly to the expansion of the franchise and the processes of democratic governance to build a better world. At the same time the impact on Freud and some of his colleagues was the increasing pessimism reflected in his correspondence with Albert Einstein (Freud, S 1964). Freud disappointed the great physicist with his downbeat assessment of the prospects for the prevention of future wars. For a time, some other psychoanalysts shared the general optimism of the inter-war years that lessons had been learnt and that new and more peaceful ways of working were emerging with the League of Nations. But when the second global conflict in a generation exploded across the world it was in some ways even worse than its predecessor. It was more truly global; the horrors of the trenches and gas attacks were replaced by carpet-bombing, concentration camps, and the industrial scale mass murder of the Holocaust; and when the conflict in Asia ended, it did so with invention and first use of nuclear bombs.

Again, there was a sense that things had to be done to ensure that ‘never again’ would there be such a conflict, and this time there was a new driver. However terrible the destruction of war had been in the past everyone knew that the world could repair itself. Now we had the capacity not only to destroy our enemies, but to end civilization and perhaps human life on our planet in a nuclear winter. The trajectory to ensure a more peaceful outcome was still ‘more democracy’. First there was a further widening of democratic processes in the West and then eventually the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and a rapid increase in the number of states around the world that could reasonably be regarded as fulfilling the criteria for ‘democracy’. This was accompanied by a marked expansion of the infra-structure of international law and international institutions to control national or ‘large group’ behaviour, as exemplified by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the replacement of great power rivalry with what became known as the ‘rules-based international order’ (Alderdice, 2002, 2019)

Psychoanalysts and psychoanalysis were greatly affected by the Second World War, and perhaps even more than the international intellectual community as a whole, because of the predominance of Jewish members in the profession. Many of them who lived in continental Europe had to flee their homes and go to Britain, the United States, Latin America and Israel, so it is not surprising that they turned in upon themselves and their clinical work as a protection from the dangerous and frightening world they had experienced, and where politics had gone so badly wrong.

In one sense therefore it is a relief and something to be celebrated that in recent years the psychoanalytic world has re-emerged and is again taking an interest not only in the inner world, but in the wider world. However, there should be a health warning. We are not only opening up because a post-war generation is overcoming some of the aftermath of the Holocaust, but we are also driven to take an interest because we realize that things are going badly wrong again in society and we must do all we can to prevent another global catastrophe. We must assemble every therapeutic arrow that our quiver will hold, to fend off the unfolding crises. At the same time, as we know from our patients, there is a danger that our previous adverse experiences may so mould our expectations that instead of applying our free-floating attention to the current societal task we may be ‘fighting the last war’, as military strategists would say.

The excellent papers written by my three colleagues, Barry Richards, Bob Hinshelwood and Karl Figlio have built upon the observations and analyses they presented at the Freud Museum conference in September 2020, including the insights developed by further observing external societal events and trends and trying to interpret them through a psychoanalytic lens. I continue to work in politics, academia, and in societies affected by violent conflict. Everywhere the impact of the global pandemic is exaggerating and accelerating changes that were already underway. We are also seeing other changes resulting more specifically from the impact of the infection, the immunological disease it can cause, and the restrictions, reactions, and profound anxieties in societies all around the world. I want to make a few observations about the changes that are taking place during this period which may well represent a watershed as significant as that following the global conflicts of the early twentieth century, but may even be seen as a period of inflection unprecedented since the transformations that ended the Middle Ages and proceeded through the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment to our modern world with its wholly new and different social, political and economic order.

During that this transition to modernity there was an assumption that the French Revolutionary formulation of *‘Liberty, Equality and Fraternity’* was not only the motto for what we should work to achieve but was in some sense the natural order were it not skewed by elites that were at best selfish and at worst malign in their relations with their fellow human beings. But as we explore these concepts from a psychoanalytical perspective and ground ourselves, as best we can, in lived experience rather than a ‘wished for’ world, I think it will become apparent how some of these fundamental principles may need to evolve.

As Barry Richards points out, at an individual level, and arguably collectively, there is ambivalence towards authority. He shows that while we are enthusiastic in calling for equality when we perceive ourselves to be less than equal, it is not at all clear that we are so content for ‘authority’ to set limits on our wishes, though this is necessary if the needs of others are to be taken into account. The more we make progress, the more a democratic way of functioning based on the principle of equality faces major challenges.

We know from our work with individuals that we have competing wishes within ourselves and we see ambivalence in our feelings of love and hate towards the same person, sometimes even at the same time. We also have competing wishes, wanting to relate with others, but at the same time to be free to follow our own pursuits. These challenges are at least as significant for wider society. We want the structure and protection against others that can be provided by authority but resent the restrictions when they are placed on our personal freedom. We want better public services, but we do not want to pay the higher taxes needed to resource them. As a result, the way that we structure our societal relationships and create a better life are matters of profound disagreement. As Isaiah Berlin pointed out, there is not, and cannot be agreement on ‘the good’. (Berlin, 2002) This means that there is inevitable ambivalence towards authority, but also that society harbours different perspectives and sets of values that go beyond the level of our economic circumstances and whether one is in authority or not.

Psychoanalysts also realize that in our individual functioning there is no settled state. We function in a constantly dynamic way with our different, varying and competing wishes and challenges. So too in society at large, communal, regional, national, and global, competing perspectives, wishes and even fundamental principles are in a constant and inevitable struggle. In that sense liberal democracy cannot be the kind of stable end-state for human development that Francis Fukuyama (1992) once posited, and cannot be a constant ideal either.

There is a further challenge for a psychanalytical approach that was devised out of the experience of working with individuals. Society is made up of individuals, but we function in relationship with others, indeed from the start, even before birth, we cannot survive on our own. This becomes clear to anyone who tries to get elected on the basis of their own personal qualities and energies. They quickly find that to succeed they need to be a member of a political party or movement, and this requires that they subsume some of their ideas and wishes to the perspective of the group or political party. It also becomes obvious that it is not the personal realities but the public image that is key to electoral politics and the state against which we react is the ‘state object’ in our minds. When one gets involved with government it becomes clear that the state is a complex group phenomenon and the impact that most individuals have on it, even those who are senior in politics, is usually modest and passing. This means that a psychoanalytic approach that is based on theories developed to understand individual functioning does not have a simple direct read-across to large group phenomena.

So, when we think about those political leaders who have a major impact on society, we must recognize that it is not just a matter of their individual psychopathology but how they are ‘tuning in’ to profound emotional drives at a societal level and Barry Richards gives the examples of Hungary and Turkey. I am familiar with both.

Victor Orban is the leader of Fidesz, a Hungarian political party which was at one time a member of Liberal International - the global family which currently has a membership of some 100 liberal parties. Victor was one of the courageous young people who had channeled public disenchantment with Soviet rule and played a significant role in ending communism in his own country. His Fidesz party joined Liberal International, and I served with him on the governing Bureau of LI. However, politics in Hungary was also driven by other powerful feelings including resentment of the loss of status and empire at the end of the First World War and the European Union seemed to offer the chance to rebuild after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. However, I quickly became aware that Victor in his own personality exemplified and expressed that resentment of restraint and rules that came out of the experience of imperial defeat and communist authoritarianism and we had a personal confrontation at a meeting of the LI Bureau when it became clear that while he was a member of the Liberal family he was engaging more and more closely with the Christian Democrats and Helmut Kohl. The repair and rebuilding of the lost pride, culture and politics of past glories was a powerful driver that he did not want to restrain, and he left that Bureau meeting never to return. It was at the Liberal International Executive Meeting in Ottawa/Hull in 2000, when I was Deputy of Liberal International, that Fidesz withdrew from the Liberal family and while one can interpret that in terms of Victor Orban’s own personal ambitions and attitudes, he could only have been successful if he represented, for his community, something of how they felt and wished to act and react. Leaders are leaders in so far, and for as long, as they, in their very personality, represent the ‘personality’ of the majority group in their community. This will not be the perspective of everyone, but the idea of a liberal democracy is that it gives respect to the range of different and even divergent perspectives in its community. Where it represents only the views of a dominant group, such majoritarianism can be experienced by minorities as being as tyrannical as a dictatorship, and with less chance of change.

Richards compares the trajectory of Hungary with that of Turkey and points out that while they have important cultural and political differences, they are both the modest remainders of powerful historic empires with twentieth century experiences of defeat and humiliation which he describes as having produced “a seedbed of narcissistic rage”. Those who rightly understand the European project as a positive result coming out the horrible calamities of the two terrible wars, often appreciate less well that it is now being experienced by increasing numbers of its citizens, not as the peace project that ensures that war never returns to Europe, but as a centralizing authority that pays little respect to different cultures and is characterised by homogenizing regulation instead of a rich diversity of relationships.

For Turkey the EU is also seen as hypocritical and dishonest because while it presented itself as having an open door to any neighbouring democratic state, Germany, France, and the Netherlands in particular had never any intention of permitting a state with a large number of Muslim citizens to join the EU because of the cultural dissonance that would result. The United Kingdom had a very different approach. Britain was keen to have the Common Market extended to Turkey because it wanted a network of economic relationships, not a transnational state. Such a network could transcend cultural differences much more than a polity with the characteristics of a state which would have laws, leaders, structures, and boundaries at the continental level, and most of all a common dominant culture. The culture of the EU is what one might describe as ‘Christian without the Faith’. Its roots in Christendom are profoundly powerful even though many of the beliefs have gone, and this fading in religious beliefs and practice can obscure how politically and socially significant the roots remain. In Israel, by contrast, it is still open and obvious that there is a major struggle between those who want their country to take the same trajectory – Jewish but not religious – and those for whom the religious roots remain the essence of the nation.

Our posture on such fundamental issues affects how we interpret the behaviour of others. If as a democrat I see a liberal democratic state providing comprehensive health care, enhanced employment rights, generous educational provision, and welfare benefits, I say that it is caring for its people. If a state that I regard as undemocratic does those same things I may regard it as dishonestly seducing the populace away from the perspective that I regard as the right way of governing with the use or abuse of those same national benefits. Again, if I believe that globalization is ‘a good thing’ I will be unhappy that people turn away or ‘regress’ to a more nationalistic form of governance because they are uneasy about, or even antagonistic to, some of the cultural as well as social, political, and economic effects of globalization.

Some of the attitudes I have just described are based on the assumption that if people have better socio-economic circumstances, they will inevitably see things more like I do. These were the assumptions that drove Western policy towards the former Soviet Union and China. The results were not what the West had hoped for or expected. China has become more economically wealthy and powerful through a market economy, but at the same time it has become even less politically liberal or democratic.

Another profound shock for many liberals was the success of Donald Trump in becoming “the political love-object” for many Americans. How could this happen and what does it represent, psychologically? In a similar way as with Victor Orban in Hungary and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Donald Trump is seen by many ordinary people as standing against the liberal elites who despise their national cultural values. That Trump seems to be authoritarian accords with their perspective that democracy has only facilitated a weakening and disregard for the things that are important to them and that differ from the elite ‘liberal democratic’ agenda. The idea that people want to have everyone as ‘equal’ seems to me mistaken. When people are, or feel disadvantaged, they want ‘equality’, but when they are no longer disadvantaged, they want to be better than the others. Few people support a football team in the hope that every match will be a draw – they want their team to win.

While in theory democrats want an alternation of power, in practice they always want their political party to win and the ‘others’ to always lose. They don’t feel that the political parties or their values are equal – on the contrary, recent years have seen many liberals becoming increasingly intolerant of different views and wanting to ensure that there is not only no alternation of power, but no platform for contrary perspectives. The problem with this approach is that in so far as it is successful in denying platforms for those with whom they disagree, those who have a different set of values, if they feel themselves to be always losing, will become angry, and potentially violent, as is the case with many white working-class people in the US. The dilemma for liberals is that they want to believe in a rational electorate but only if it agrees with them. Actually, the electorate is largely driven by emotions, and they may or may not share the liberal agenda. Minorities are rarely happy to be repeatedly defeated and if they also feel that the majority disregards what is important to them and they have no hope of overturning it in elections there is a real danger of the system breaking down. Groups take to the streets to protest and then turn to violence if the protests are not successful, as has recently happened in the USA. At a national level, governments that represent these populist perspectives may refuse to abide by international law, as we saw recently with the UK Government, post-Brexit.

The importance of understanding these dynamics is that it helps us to appreciate that it is not that one side are the ‘good guys’ and the other are the ‘bad guys’, but rather it is a problem of a relationship breakdown. Unfortunately, not only do the anti-establishment protestors believe that they are right, but the elites also see no ‘fault’ on their side either. An example of this is the EU/UK argument about the Northern Ireland Protocol. The EU sees the UK as having breached an agreement they had accepted. However, the EU paid no attention to the concerns of the Protestant Unionists in Northern Ireland, even to the point of falsifying reality when President Macron refused to accept that Northern Ireland was an integral part of the United Kingdom.

This leads us to the problem of falsifying reality, which is addressed by Karl Figlio. We need to be careful about what we regard as ‘reality’ or facts. We may find ourselves speaking of government or ‘the people’ as though these are homogenous entities when they are not. We may wish to believe that our views represent the majority perspective when it is only a majority of those with whom we mix, or in the case of social media, the majority of the information we receive, courtesy of the algorithms to which our accounts are subject.

This is especially problematic because the algorithms are sorting the information sent to us to ensure that it conforms to our preferred perspective. It is in any case almost universal to believe that one’s own perspective on how problems should be addressed, or the community governed, is the correct or virtuous or realistic one and that others are mistaken or malign. Figlio points out that when someone shouts ‘fake news’ this is not because they are dissatisfied with the evidence but because they are setting down a boundary between two worlds of thinking. This is an interesting observation, and it is important to probe it further. When experts say things that people do not want to hear, those people may look for reasons to not believe them. This is because the ‘truth’ that the experts are conveying is unwelcome, but it is also because the experts have been proved wrong in the past. Predictions have been made with great confidence in economics and politics and were subsequently shown to be entirely wrong. When Her Majesty, The Queen, publicly asked a group of experts in economics why the models they were using neither warned of the impending crash nor enabled us to avoid it, they had no answer. They were not prepared to appreciate the limits of prediction in economics, and they too were affected by the wish to believe (just as those who criticized them wished to believe) that prediction was possible, and the experts had simply made the wrong predictions. It is very difficult to accept that no matter how much we know, there are certain kinds of outcome that cannot be predicted. As the Danish physicist, Niels Bohr is said to have remarked “Prediction is very difficult, especially if it's about the future.”

Especially in times of high anxiety, people want certainty, and they will vote for those who seem to provide it. This has led politicians who want to be successful in democratic elections to be ‘economical with the truth.’ They have found that if the truth, in so far as one can know it, is unpleasant, then telling the truth will not get them elected. The candidate who says, “If you want better public services and lower taxation, then vote for me” will likely be elected over the one who says, “I will need to take more of your money to pay for better public services, which will benefit those who are less well-off more than you.” This has resulted in the election of leaders because they have appealed to peoples’ feelings but have presented an unrealistic prospectus which they cannot fulfil, with the result that the standing of politics and politicians is inevitably lowered. This encouraged those on the left to promise more than could be delivered, and also to project a split between those who needed and deserved the virtuous proposals in their manifesto, as against those ‘others’ on the right who were selfish and dishonest.

They discovered that they needed to make some members of society into devotees if they were to succeed in getting elected and, since the majority of people do not want much change most of the time, they promulgated theories that split people into two groups – those that have power and property, and those that do not. The truth is more complex but if you want people to devote themselves to your cause you need to simplify it into black and white and get people to believe rather than ask questions. The right then adopted the same tactics and now social media has exacerbated this split because it was discovered that instead of having to work out your own persuasive messages to put out on social media you could concentrate on using automated machine bots to exaggerate and magnify the messages of the two opposing sides and to deepen the societal splits. The speed of transmission increased the impact, resulting in greater societal disruption. The theory is that if it is not possible to bring about what you want directly, you can disrupt the system to the point of breakdown and then something new will have to emerge.

Figlio points out that the move we have seen towards the unqualified endorsement of the person of the leader, and not just of the leader’s policies, draws people into a disregard for truth if it does not fit with ‘their’ reality. One might ask whether there was any substantial prior time when people held to objective reality and truth. It is arguable that previous generations espoused ideas associated with religion that were also based on beliefs that were not grounded in what the intelligentsia would regard as ‘observable reality’ and that this is an essential component of humanity – that we have a ‘wishing function’ which can produce a denial of ‘truth’ that is damaging, but which also allows us to be unduly optimistic about solutions to problems which enable us to be committed to ‘good causes’ which are also unattainable by rational argumentation.

In recent centuries a view has developed that the non-rational element of our mental functioning was a component that needed to be minimized or controlled, however it is beginning to emerge (Johnson, 2020) that rationality alone may not deliver as well we think, and the non-rational element may give us access to functions that are beyond the linear reductionism that held sway in the physical sciences until Heisenberg identified his ‘uncertainty principle’. However, holding for the moment to the assumption that the rational is to be preferred to unconscious processes, we can regard the leader, who is the focus for those who are dissatisfied with the elites, as simply being a liar, and at one level this is obviously true. Why then is he ‘believed’?

Figlio rightly points out that individual dissatisfactions are consolidated into a collective dissatisfaction and bond with the leader. However, there are two contributors to this process. The first comes from the left, who prior to this development encouraged dissatisfaction by telling people how much better life ought to be for them and for much of the twentieth century this was the narrative. But when the left failed to deliver the satisfaction they had promised, those who were frustrated then turned to the ‘alternative facts’ of populism that expressed how they felt, using a different grammar and syntax of thinking, that represented for them an ‘emotional truth’ which expressed their anger. If you tell them that their leader is lying to them, they may well ask you “What is the difference between an unfulfillable vision (‘Anyone can achieve whatever they want if only they are given a chance’) and a lie?” If you tell people that everyone is equal, and that the reason they are unhappy is because someone else is denying equality to them, then people may start to believe it and look for those who have more – the elite – and attack them. The truth is that people are not equal because from their genetic structure to their experience of life and social context they are not, and never will be, equal, nor will they ever have equal opportunities.

Figlio quotes Otto Fenichel (1939) “If I can make others believe that things I know to be untrue are true, then it is also possible that my memory is deceived and what I remember as true is untrue’ (p.136). To put it in another way, if beauty is in the eye of the beholder, do we come to treat truth as being in the ear of the listener, letting go of the capacity to distinguish and allowing the lie to protect the ego from unbearable memories and unbearable realities - because for many people and communities, the reality is in fact unbearable. In this sense, ‘the lie’, is not merely a falsehood but, like a symptom, is both untrue and true in that it conveys something beyond the manifest meaning, if we know how to read it. Or as Ed Shapiro says, “We have to ask ourselves, what this other person that I disagree with is right about.” (2019) Populists are telling a truth that those who disagree with them do not want to hear – just as the terrorist who kills people is a criminal but is from his perspective obeying a ‘higher’ morality.

The fact that people can hold two contradictory things in their mind at the same time offends the rational self but is an evitable truth for the rest of the self – I love her and hate her at the same time may seem illogical but is in fact true. In the same way, a society will always be in conflict with some part of itself unless it externalizes its conflict to its relationships with others. The question is not whether there will be conflict, but whether we can try to ensure that it is not violent – as I often say, “to disagree with each other, without killing each other”.

It seems to me that such a perspective may well lead us to question some of the assumed tenets of liberal democracy. As Bob Hinshelwood has pointed out, democracy has been idealised for many decades. One takes a risk in asking questions about it, but as he points out, a central problem is the equation of democracy with freedom. He explores how we should think about democracy once we realize that the proposal that it is all about freedom cannot be fulfilled and suggests that instead we should understand it as a system of accountability.

I entirely agree with him about the idealization of democracy and the mistaken elision of freedom and democracy. As I have pointed out earlier, the notion of perfect freedom for every individual is impossible because of the conflicts, not only with the wishes of other individuals but the competing wishes within every individual. While psychoanalysts work all the time with these internal conflicts, it does not sit well with the Enlightenment view of the individual as ‘rational man’.

In the foregoing sections I have flagged up the increasing problems that have emerged in recent times with this Enlightenment perspective. Of course, we must recognize the extraordinary progress that has been possible with the guidance of these understandings and the development of democracy. This progress has not only been political in the narrow sense but social and economic too. As an example, it is less than a century since we began to create a welfare state and less than seventy-five years since the National Health Service came into being and both have demonstrated their value yet again in this time of pandemic. Some have suggested that, as religious adherence has fallen in Britain, the NHS has taken its place as a sacred entity. The health service is now so highly valued that it is impossible for any politician to question its funding, other than to propose increases, and this is one of the many dilemmas and challenges that face anyone who is elected to public office.

The population imagines that those who are elected to public office have power, but one of the greatest disappointments of democracy is to be found amongst those elected to public office who discover how little they can do. Most of the public purse is already committed expenditure, and the outcome of increasing risk aversion and the reaction to calamities in the past is a system of regulation in every aspect of life. Public life is becoming ever less desirable as a career. The remuneration even for those in the highest offices of the state is meagre in relation to the level of responsibility undertaken. The public scrutiny and abuse to which such figures are exposed is deeply painful and their tenure of office is uncertain and frequently very short. The salary of the British Prime Minister is currently around £160,000 per year – half of this is his/her salary as an MP and the other half is for their role as Prime Minister. The general public may regard this as substantial, however it is less than a twentieth of the median take home pay of the Chief Executives of the UK’s top FTSE 100 Companies (estimated at £3.61 million per year in 2020) and miniscule compared to ‘celebrities’ such as the Manchester United footballer and political campaigner, Marcus Rashford who gets £10.4 million a year – seventy times what the Prime Minister earns - and he receives none of the vilification reserved for public servants who take responsibility for difficult decisions. This is not to take away from the fact that Marcus Rashford, for example, has been able to persuade governments and individuals to direct more of their money to specific good causes, and may indeed have made some personal financial contributions, but if young people observe the monetary value society places on celebrities as against political representatives, we should not be surprised if they are more interested in pursuing an interest in sport than in public service.

In the past it was felt that citizens had little opportunity to exercise their power other than through voting every four years or so, but this is no longer the case. Apart from the fact that in some parts of the United Kingdom political parties face elections almost every year - to assemblies and parliaments in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and London and to various levels of municipal authorities, police commissioner posts, and metro mayoralties, though no longer to the European Parliament. Since these are largely elections of representatives of political parties the outcome is an on-going poll on the performance of the parties and their leaders. In addition, the ‘twenty-four hour news cycle’ ensures a form of constant ‘accountability’ to the point where many public figures are unable to reflect on anything since they are reacting all the time to public criticism through multiple channels. When they discover that they can actually do relatively little to change things in the short period of a mandate after which they must face the electorate again, they find themselves offering increasingly unrealistic prospectuses because they have discovered that the citizens do not vote for more realistic ones.

If there is constant accountability but the freedom for everyone, including our leaders, is much more limited and hedged around than we would like to imagine, what is the real purpose of democracy? It is simply the best, and perhaps the only system that we have yet devised to enable us regularly to change governments without resorting to violence or the threat of violence. When democracy breaks down, violence or the threat of violence returns.

It is often suggested that the discontent with politicians is because they cannot be trusted to deliver the things they have promised, and of course if they have promised the undeliverable this is obviously true. However sometimes our complaint is that they do deliver what they promised, but we do not like it. For many people, inside and outside the USA, the problem with Donald Trump was that he did try to implement what he had promised, for example the focus on ‘America First’ and the construction of a wall to keep out immigrants from Mexico. We may be dissatisfied because governments fail, but we are also unhappy if they succeed when we do not share their sense of what is ‘the good’.

In addition to these problems of freedom and democracy, there is an assumption that equality goes along with democracy. Bob Hinshelwood argues against the possibility of success for the ‘trickle-down’ theory of promoting equality, but if equality cannot in truth exist, why does it remain an ‘ideal’? Equality and inequality have often been measured in crude financial terms and money has always been a part of people’s values – nothing is ‘free’ (another sense of the word). It is certainly the case that the degree of inequality between the income of high earners and average pay has become extraordinary and this degree of disparity is unhealthy. He is right to observe that it may never be possible to achieve either equality in wealth or other disparities in values, such as bias-free politics, but a ‘vigilant minimisation’ is much to be preferred to the promotion and exploitation of these differences. However, I am not sure how far I agree that in private life with relatives, friends and acquaintances, ordinary human values of honesty, consideration, loyalty, and fairness still dominate. It does seem to me that selfish individualism has impacted at every level, as the former Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks pointed out in his last book, “Morality” (2020).

I doubt that we have lost any ideal form of democracy, for I do not think that there is any evidence that democracy, as we would currently like to believe in it, has ever existed for any length of time. Ancient Greece is often referenced, but most people there had no place in the polity at all – women, slaves, children etc. This being the case, should ‘equality’ be regarded as a matter of principle if it is impossible, both in theory and in practice? The fact of being conceived with different genetic material is not even the start of the inequality and it often increases from there. If it cannot be achieved in principle or in practice, should we not be aiming at ‘fairness’ rather than equality?

Democracy has a further challenge because there is no unanimity on what is ‘the good’ as Isaiah Berlin calls it. People disagree on what kind of society they want to see, so any democratic outcome will mean that some people will be disappointed – as Bob Hinshelwood points out – but also disregarded under most of the majoritarian systems we currently have. In that sense, ‘Fraternity’, the third pillar of the French revolutionary motto, is as dubious as the other two - ‘Liberty’ and ‘Equality’. Surely a better ambition is to try to build a sense of Community amongst people who share the same space. That is to say, not a sense of brotherly love, or kinship of principle as might be meant by fraternity, but rather a way of living together with our differences as we share the same space – and now a virtual as well as physical space.

The purpose of voting in a democracy then is not only to change the government but to inform it of the range of perspectives, and the job of the opposition is not merely to be the government-in-waiting, but to ensure that good governance is informed by an appreciation of the diverse perspectives within the community. Ideas of representation and accountability do not require constant voting, and in fact voting is often used to justify a disregard and lack of representation of those who are in a minority. Representation requires that views are listened to, and accountability involves the publicizing of the actions of those who are trying to govern.

So, if “Liberty, Equality and Fraternity” have run their course, can we understand that liberty needs to be paired with liberality – generosity of spirit; that equality as an ambition would be better replaced by fairness in our treatment of each other; and that instead of a fraternity of shared perspectives we should work on creating a community with a plurality of culture, with all the paradoxes that involves.

Finally, we need to add to our understanding of human beings as separate individuals an appreciation that ‘relationship’ is the essential non-reducible phenomenon, at the level of individuals and of large groups, and if we do this, we may transcend both disappointment and democracy as we have known it and find a new way of ‘being-in-the-world’.

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**Lord John Alderdice** is a Senior Research Fellow at Harris Manchester College, University of Oxford, Director of the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict, and an active Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords. As Alliance Party Leader he was one of the key negotiators of the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, then first Speaker of the new Northern Ireland Assembly.  He was also President (now Presidente D’Honneur) of Liberal International, the worldwide family of more than 100 liberal political parties. In his professional life he was a Consultant Psychiatrist in Psychotherapy and established, and for many years ran, the Centre for Psychotherapy in Belfast.