

ICEBERG #8:

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

“Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others that have been tried.”

– Sir Winston Churchill

It all looked so promising.

During the Twentieth Century we saw the breakdown of the old class divides and the advent of what we now perceive as modern democracy. Women actually got to vote! There was a real sense that the possibilities for the working masses were endless, and the old order would be replaced by some form of meritocracy where anyone could succeed, whatever their background.

Who knows, there could even one day be a black American President, or a female British Prime Minister!

This process of social convergence was accelerated after the World War Two as breakthroughs in mass production technology stoked the consumer revolution. Throughout the 'Fifties, 'Sixties and into the 'Seventies we witnessed a narrowing of the social and financial divides as workers became increasingly affluent.

With this increasing equality, we were all infused with an immense feeling of love and peace, man. Everything was cool.

Then something sinister happened...

I don't know exactly how it came about, but suddenly there began a massive shift to the right-wing 'neo-liberal' ideal of leaving everything to the markets. Somehow, we could all be capitalists and ride the gravy train.

The political machines of the Reagan-Thatcher axis persuaded us that greed was good. Self-interest would see a whole new era of prosperity and

expansion and we could all be a part of it. We could all own our own homes and be shareholders in major corporations.

Basically, we sold out.

Aided by the first wave of baby boomers' offspring rebelling against their non-conformist parents by actually conforming to the old conservative ideals, we entered the 'loadsamoney' generation.

But where did it all start?

The Need for Government

There's always been some form of government. In its simplest form, it's about how we organise our social structures in a cohesive way, the systems we use to make sure our communities function effectively.

In simple tribal systems, government is usually by a chief or a council of elders who make decisions based on their own judgement and informed by handed down wisdom.

With the advent of civilised society, our social systems proliferated and the nature of government became increasingly complex in order to control and manage the proletariat. The Ancient civilizations developed a whole range of different systems of government.

In Ancient Greece, for example, individual city-states could have anything ranging from Tyranny and Monarchy, through Oligarchy to full(ish) Democracy.

In fact, coming up with the concept of democracy is often regarded as the greatest legacy of the Greek civilisation. The idea was to establish a government that represented the interests of the whole people and not just an elite minority. The word itself stems from the Greek *demos* meaning the entire citizenry. The democratic assembly in Athens was open to all males over 18 years old, and each had the right to speak and to vote on the issues of the day.

JARGON BUSTER: How many rulers?

Monarchy = 1 ruler - generally hereditary, and may have limited powers

Autocracy, dictatorship = 1 absolute ruler

Tyranny, despotism = 1 harsh ruler

Plutocracy = Rule by the wealthy

Aristocracy = Rule by the elite

Oligarchy = A few powerful individuals having undue influence

Democracy = Rule by elected representatives

Anarchy = No one leader – self-governing

Is Democracy the Best Way?

There was however a problem with this approach, which is one of the reasons for Churchill's apparent disdain of democracy. As critics such as Aristophanes and Thucydides pointed out, the average citizens were less well informed and could be easily swayed by the arguments of powerful and charismatic speakers. It was easy for style to prevail over substance.

And this problem has dogged the democratic process right up to the present day, with the most convincing and believable leaders most likely to emerge victorious, almost regardless of their political stance.

This phenomenon ultimately led to a degree of Plutocracy (from the Greek *ploutos*, meaning wealth) where the rich and powerful could influence the best orators to persuade the masses to accept policies that ultimately served the interests of the wealthy classes.

Not much has changed there then! We see the same scenario being acted out in modern day politics. Despite the best efforts of Theodore Roosevelt to break the power of the handful of massively wealthy families that dominated corporate America, it seems that in our current day democracy we're still pandering to the few.

The very nature of our political systems ensures this is the case. Elections are won and lost based primarily not on policy but on the quality of the election campaign. And that costs money. Enter the political donors, complete with strings attached. Or, as we're seeing with Donald Trump and already saw with Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, the super rich able to pursue their own agendas.

Why Democracy is a Sham

But quite apart from this drift towards plutocracy, there's another even more fundamental problem with our modern democracies.

Simply put, they are not democracies at all – they're a complete sham.

In the UK right now, there's a government in power that received votes from less than a quarter of the eligible electorate. And we call that democracy?

'How is that possible?' you're probably asking. Well, it's all down to the 'first past the post' system where the winner takes all, nothing for the losers. Unfortunately, the way it works, that means nothing for the majority of us.

Here are the official numbers for the 2015 UK General Election:

Government (Conservatives)	36.9% of votes cast
Opposition	63.1% of votes cast

But that doesn't take into account abstentions – people who didn't vote. Over a third of people registered to vote failed to turn out. When we factor them into the numbers it looks like this (and that's not taking into account the roughly 800,000 who hadn't even bothered to register):

Government (Conservatives)	24.4% of registered voters
Opposition	41.7% of registered voters
Abstained	33.9% of registered voters

It's telling fact that more people abstained than actually voted for the government party. It all points to both the undemocratic nature of politics in the UK and the to the growing disconnect it has created between the people and the political system. And it's a trend that has become noticeably worse in the Twenty-First Century.

Up to the 'Nineties election turnouts had always been between 70% and 85%, but in every election this century at least one person in three has failed to vote. Perhaps this is a result of the convergence of ideologies among the two main political parties, meaning that whoever you vote for the result in practical terms is very little different.

And there's another crazy aspect to this system. In 1983 Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government was re-elected with a 'landslide' victory, winning nearly 400 of the 650 available seats in the House of Commons. With well under half of the votes cast, she claimed she'd been given "a clear mandate from the people" to push through her strongly right-wing agenda.

But let's take a closer look at how the various parties were represented:

Party	Seats	Percentage	Votes	Percentage
Conservative	397	61.1%	13,012,316	42.4%
Labour	203	31.2%	8,456,934	27.6%
Liberal Democrat	23	3.5%	7,780,949	25.4%
Ulster Unionist	11	1.7%	259,952	1.1%

Source: UK Political Info (<http://www.ukpolitical.info/1983.htm>)

Notice the following, quite apart from the overwhelming dominance of the Conservatives, even with only 42.4% of the vote:

- Labour have roughly nine times as many seats as the Liberal Democrat/Social Democratic alliance even though they only got 2.2% more share of the vote.
- The Democratic alliance, with over a quarter of the vote, got only 3.5% of the representation.
- The Ulster Unionist Party got nearly half as many seats as the Democrats despite having nearly thirty times less votes.

None of this makes any rational sense. Not only does it fail to serve the actual needs of the people – the *demos* – it also leads to an unstable

government which swings from one extreme to another, depending on who's in power. We'll come back to this idea a while later.

First though, we'll take a look at...

Democracy in America?

Even in the US with a two party system, things are not clear-cut.

The number of non-voters in US Presidential elections is even higher than in the UK. In 2012 more than two voters in every five didn't turn out, so Obama's 51.1% of the popular vote translated to only 28.1% of the total voting age population (VAP) voting for him. In other words, seven out of every ten Americans didn't actually vote for Obama.

Year	President	Party	% of votes cast	Non voters (% of VAP)	Votes as % of VAP
2012	Obama	Democrat	51.1%	45.1%	28.1%
2008	Obama	Democrat	52.9%	41.8%	30.8%
2004	Bush Jr	Republican	50.7%	43.3%	28.7%
2000	Bush Jr	Republican	47.9%	48.8%	24.5%*
1996	Clinton	Democrat	49.2%	51.0%	24.1%*
1992	Clinton	Democrat	43.0%	44.8%	23.7%*
1988	Bush	Republican	53.4%	49.9%	26.8%*
1984	Reagan	Republican	58.8%	46.7%	31.3%
1980	Reagan	Republican	50.7%	47.4%	26.7%*
* There were three Presidential candidates in these years					
Source: The American Democracy Project (www.presidency.ucsb.edu)					

In years where a third candidate stood for Presidency, the elected President received the vote of only one person in four of the VAP.

This suggests that the US is no more democratic in this respect than the UK.

In his 2008 Victory speech Obama declared his intention of working with all other interested parties to create a truly representative government and bind the country together. An inspiring thought, an alluring prospect, and a great hope for the vast majority of American people.

What followed instead was eight years of the democratically elected President struggling to get any significant reforms through the House of Representatives. The vested interests that want to maintain the status quo closed ranks and steadfastly resisted reform. Rather than building a new inclusive America, the inertia in the political system only resulted in more of the same old, same old.

A lost opportunity that could yet cost the country very dear.

The Role of Government

But whatever form a government takes along the spectrum from dictatorship to full democracy as we know it, there's a fundamental question: what is the actual role of government?

Basically, it is: to define, and provide a structure for the execution of, public policy. That includes financial policy such as setting and collecting taxes to provide whatever public services are required.

The trouble is, what does that actually mean? What are the areas of society that come under the definition of 'public policy'? This is where much of the political argument lies.

There are certain areas we accept as being the job of government, including:

- Economic management
- Financial regulation
- Defence
- Creating laws
- Law enforcement
- Education

We can add healthcare, but that's an area where there's some debate as to how involved government should be. Likewise, our vital infrastructure such as transport, water supply and waste disposal.

In the UK, for example, there was significant nationalisation during the socialist post-war era. Not only the National Health Service and railways, but also whole industries such as coal, power, steel, and even parts of the automobile industry. Most of these have since been re-privatised as part of the neo-liberal swing towards more open free-market economies during the 'Eighties.

After years of privatisation, things changed dramatically when the British government stepped in to bail out some of the troubled banks during the

financial crisis. And now there are further calls for state intervention in strategic industries like steel, which has come under threat from Chinese dumping.

And this is a serious issue. Should strategic industries be in private hands where shareholders profit in the good times, and the public bail them out when times are tough? Whatever your ideology, that in itself is a tough question.

So far as the role of government is concerned the big issue at stake really is, where do we draw the line between the role of the state and our role as citizens?

Why Government Is Failing

The answer lies in understanding who our governments are serving. And to find that out we need to know who it is they're listening to.

But who is government? Who makes the big decisions on policy? Sure, our elected members get to vote on issues, but who decides which issues get voted on in the first place? Who sets the political agenda? Probably, it's those with the loudest voices a.k.a. the biggest wallets.

OK, so we can petition on specific issues and gain small victories, but the big policy decisions that have the most impact on the quality of our lives, and the lives of our children, are almost always made based on the interests of the few.

The important point to grasp is that the quality of any government depends almost entirely on its intent.

A dictatorship where the dictator is in touch with his people and acts in their best interests is far better than a sham democracy. It just doesn't feel right because we have this weird notion that power corrupts, and that sooner or later a dictator will start to turn things to his or her personal advantage, or that of their most intimate followers.

That's a complete myth. All power does is make people more powerful by amplifying the effects of their actions. A good person can do way more good from a position of power, and a bad person can do more harm. There are even profiling tools available that can test whether someone is likely to behave better or worse as they acquire positions of greater power.

So, we have 'democratic' governments where minorities rule, and even those minorities are generally not truly representing the interests of their voters.

It's no wonder we feel disconnected from our political systems.

Are National Governments Becoming Powerless?

If governments have tended to become the puppets of their donors, we have to ask the question of who is actually doing the governing? Who is setting the regulatory frameworks that determine the future course of our society?

And in these days of mega corporations, just how much power can individual governments actually have?

The financial might of Apple Corporation is the equivalent of the 55th largest country in the world. When large corporations can dwarf smaller economies it creates significant shifts in the power balance in favour of big business.

Even large economic blocks like the EU are susceptible to their influence. Take the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) as an example. This agreement would basically give corporations the right to redress from governments who pass legislation that has the effect of harming their financial interests.

So, if a company markets a product that has harmful side effects and a country decides to ban it, they could potentially have to compensate the business for its loss of profits. Imagine the potential consequences if such an agreement were already in place: every time we restricted tobacco advertising or increased taxes on booze, trans-national companies could have sued our governments. And who will pay if this legislation goes through? We will, of course!

Our governments will be powerless to resist the interests of the mega corporations.

It's vital for our big economic blocks to behave in a way that is truly democratic – in other words, for the benefit of the people, not the interest of the few. They appear to be sadly negligent in this respect at the moment.

But if individual governments lack the clout to resist the interests of the few, then they have to band together, and do so with the right intent.

Making Government Relevant

To make government more relevant it needs to re-focus on the needs of the people. Instead of asking, "How can we best govern?" it needs to ask a different question. It needs to ask, "How can we best serve?" As the Eighteenth Century French politician Alexandre Auguste Ledru-Rollin suggested:

"There go the people. I must follow them, for I am their leader."

In the modern age, that probably means shifting the locus of control so local communities have more say in their own government. People these days are

educated enough (even if we're not being educated properly!) to not need a 'nanny' state to decide things for them.

Central government should be focussed on only doing the things that only it can do, like major legislation or big infrastructure projects. The rest they should leave to us.

There is some movement towards this in the UK with the 2011 Localism Act, but as yet there appears to be no corresponding dismantling of central government control. The jury's still out.

Government needs to cosy up and get closer to the people – us: you and me.

One way of doing this is making sure we have true democracy. Our concept of democracy seems to have drifted away from the intent (to serve the people) towards process. The democratic *process* ensures we all have the right to vote, but the democratic *intent* is that we should all have the right to be heard.

In many European states (and elsewhere across the globe), they use Proportional Representation (PR) to achieve this. PR's critics say that it's too complicated and results in weak government, often pointing to the example of Germany with its succession of coalition governments.

In my view, that's actually its greatest strength: not having strong government that can push through legislation against the wishes of the people. It also creates greater stability, as successive administrations do not keep swinging from one extreme to another.

But even with PR, it's not true democracy unless *everybody's* involved and heard. That means we need to get the opinion of the non-voters too. It's no good to just say, "They had their chance," and then ignore them.

Only if we can make government genuinely inclusive, relevant, and for the people, can we have true democracy and the chance to create a future that works for everyone.

Trump and Brexit

After writing this chapter we had major political upsets on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the UK voters elected to leave the European Union, and then Donald Trump won the US Presidential elections. In both cases the result represented a shock triumph for old guard conservative values.

I take great heart from that because it seems to me like the final death cry of the old order. The older generation, feeling threatened by the uncertainty of modern day existence, are trying to get back to a time when things are better. They'd like to return to the 1950's and '60's when the Western economies

were enjoying a post-WW2 boom, there was over-full employment and life was good.

The irony is that things were no different then. The Brexit vote was largely swung on the issue of immigration, and yet the '60's saw a massive influx of workers 'taking our jobs' just like today. And we still need them to keep our economy working and to do the jobs we're not inclined to do.

And if Trump wants a return to the racism and bigotry of times past, you only have to look at what that means. Race riots and civil unrest were part of everyday life. Do we really want to get back to that?

What's particularly heartening is that the younger generation rejects this interpretation of how we should be addressing the issues of the future. Let's take a look at how Millennials voted in the recent polls:

- According to a YouGov poll immediately before the EU referendum 72% of 18-24-year-olds were in favour of remain.
- But it's estimated that only 36% of that age group actually turned out to vote, and 58% of 25-34-year-olds. This compares to over 80% turnout for the predominantly 'Leave' over 55s.
- In the US election only 37% of 18-29s voted for Trump compared to 55% for Clinton.
- If only Millennials had voted the result would have been a landslide victory for Clinton with 473 electoral college votes against 32 for Trump.

We've already mentioned the disaffection people feel in relation to our political systems, and these figures show that it's especially pronounced among younger voters.

This is a huge problem at the moment because everyone's future is at stake, and only if everyone turns out to vote and be heard can we make sure we get decisions that work for all.

By the time Brexit actually gets worked through, half the people who voted for it will be dead, leaving the generation that wanted to remain to deal with a future they neither wanted nor voted for.

At least Trump is only temporary. Although, if we're given the choice between two candidates that nobody wants from the main parties, how can we seriously call that democracy?

My hope is that, when the reactionary older generation starts to die off we'll see a move to a more inclusive political landscape where the true ethos of democracy is embraced and the voice of 'we the people' is properly heard.