

Is democracy in crisis?

Throughout the European Union, political commentators have noted a growing dissatisfaction with politics and politicians. People are becoming less and less interested in public affairs. The chasm between rulers and ruled is widening. Abstentions from elections, complaints about politics and politicians, and protest votes are all signs of disaffection with politics. Democracy, observers believe, is an ailing body.

But how accurate is this diagnosis? Is democracy really in crisis?

1. Public dissatisfaction with the workings of democracy is the same today as it was in the past. In the history of all states there have been many moments when a large segment of the population has felt alienated from prevailing policy. Now as then, the problems that preoccupy the public can be resolved through democratic processes. These problems tend to be social conflicts, disputes over the distribution of wealth, disagreements about the potential of individual progress – issues that the democratic system must resolve.

The difference nowadays is that while solutions may be evident, they are questioned on many sides. Today's problems are not imputed by the majority exclusively to the elite who exercises economic and political power, but also by broader groups in society to equally large groups. Groups that do not enjoy secure employment, good pensions and opportunities for social development question groups that have secured solutions, even

though they may not differ radically in social status from other 'non-privileged' groups. The insured workers of today, for example, are much better off than those who are now joining the workforce. The latter have less chance of finding work and will be subject to inferior insurance arrangements. Changes to work and insurance regulations for future generations are not popular. Society is not ready to provide solutions, hence the inability, uncertainty and hesitation on the part of politicians to intervene. This creates an image of inertia and crisis.

The present 'crisis' is linked to the growth of the middle class and the increasing number of citizens who make their voices heard and who demand to participate. Services acquire greater importance in economic life, and along with them, the middle classes. For instance, both in the north of France and the area around Turin, following the closure of mines and factories, the majority of the inhabitants of what were once industrial cities now work in the tertiary sector. Workers are no longer a distinct group on the margins of society. Due to the specialised nature of the work they now do they put themselves on the same social level as white-collar workers and small entrepreneurs. They lead the same lifestyle. Their level of education has improved. The mass media ensure that they receive constant information. Thus the range of citizens with opinions and demands, who want political action to tackle their problems, has broadened. Working on those solutions is no longer a minority concern, and there is a need for a broader participation of those concerned in the political process.

The apparent crisis is the consequence of major social and economic shifts that have taken place, of globalisation and of new technologies. Society and its institutions must adapt to new conditions. However, necessary change provokes social upheaval. Unexpected issues shake the public's confidence in the future. The change in the population profile, with the spectacularly aging population, makes existing social insurance arrangements inadequate. And new arrangements look more unfavourable. It is becoming increasingly difficult to secure employment without lifelong training. Social compromises such as collective wage agreements that ensure stability are being called into question. Legislation, which has been traditionally resistant to change, and thus provided certainty about the rules of collective life, now changes rapidly so that it can adapt to new circumstances. These unforeseen changes prompt questioning and fear as to what will follow, a need for new directions and ideas, and for criteria for new social compromises to ensure social peace.

Plans for the new era are the responsibility of political forces, which, however, hesitate to assume the role of guide to society, with ideas and initiatives for social change. Their view of the new is deliberately unclear. This hazy view precludes objections, ensures a wider range of options and leaves the door open for about-faces. Party positions are formulated in such a way as to demonstrate to supporters that they are interested but this interest does not come with any commitments. Their stance makes it highly likely that any decision will be defined by public opinion. This political tactic makes a priority of what the opinion polls tell us the public want. Firmly held beliefs take second place and what is advisable or

necessary in the long term is ignored. In this way necessary policies for development and greater social justice are ignored.

There is a very specific reason for the stance of the various political forces. In a society where the middle class dominates and class differences are no longer particularly marked, the leading political parties represent at the same time diverse social groups whose interests and views differ and clash. In order to gain power, it is crucial that none of these social groups be alienated from the party. Their support must be ensured, despite their divergent aims. Swinging voters must be won over, even when they do not identify with the majority of supporters. In such circumstances, the requisite tactic is one that covers up and precludes conflict. Party discourse clarifies as little as possible. A consistent direction and sincerity are seen to limit chances of an electoral victory.

Pluralist tactics inevitably employ indirect language since they want to win the favour of the broadest possible public. All parties aim for development, a higher standard of living and better education. Conservative parties remember the need for social justice; progressive parties stress the importance of competition. Rival parties differ from one another chiefly in their negative references to each other. They call on voters to vote against the other party rather than to support specific policies. Political advertising that highlights personalities, slogans and images, heightens the sense of a war of impressions and not of positions, and it sidelines genuine problems.

Apart from pluralist tactics, there are other factors that lead to public indifference to politics: unfulfilled promises by politicians, the collapse of state socialism, the demise of the hope that a different type of society is possible; the limited resonance of ideologies as well as the complexity of issues, the inability to understand them and the difficulty of forming an informed opinion on rulers' arguments. In all European countries, solving the social insurance question and shaping labour relations in circumstances of global competition meet the objections of those concerned, people who are not convinced and do not understand that the new measures are necessary. People conclude that the issues are beyond them, not because they are complex but mainly because those in charge do not speak sincerely.

The public may not understand the various aspects of a problem but they do understand who is applying serious thought and effort to it and who is offering mere generalisations. They want to hear informed discourse that corresponds to their interests and experience. The antidote to the so-called crisis is the re-politicisation of politics. De-politicisation can be countered with discourse about what is possible and what is not, what is advisable and why, what must be avoided, what the costs and the benefits are. What is needed is not promises but explanations of what is happening. Instead of avoiding the political cost, what is needed is the courage of convictions and initiative. Politicisation comes from honesty about problems and a desire for transparency and truth. The parties whose stance sustains the crisis are also in a position to resolve it. All that is needed is to formulate clear views that respond to the problems; to present them in a public forum; to

support them in an ongoing dialogue with the community; to rally citizens to accept and implement them, and in this way to create a social dynamic for participation in the political process.

The decline of ideologies and the inability of institutions to respond to expectations do not necessarily herald a period of diminishing importance for politics. Politics is not confined to established practice. It can overcome situations that seem entrenched. The so-called crisis is precisely what leads to creative quests, and provides suitable opportunities for change. An example is that of social movements and non-governmental organisations that arose from the current 'inertia' and created a new, positive set of circumstances.

Voters showed much greater interest in the French presidential elections of 2007 than they had in the past. Not only did far more people vote, but the pre-election rallies were larger and discussion more substantial. The reason was that the candidates did not use standardised language; they tried to distance themselves from standard party policies and present something new.

2. Tied up with the lack of interest in politics is the public's feeling that all they are entitled to do is to express an opinion during elections once every four years. In the interim, none of their representatives is interested in what they believe and what they want.

In a recent report, *The Future of Democracy in Europe*, the Council of Europe recommends a series of reforms to overcome this alienation. The measures include: The possibility of more choice in

elections (e.g. a different vote for party and Members of Parliament); someone elected (e.g. as an MP) should have a deputy with whom they share the responsibilities of the office; election of expert advisory councils; councils of foreign residents in the country to be elected by a special procedure; community service as an alternative to military service; possibility of local government at each level raising objections to decisions made by a superior agency (Yellow Card); legal framework with the possibility of specialization not only by the central state but also by local government; public participation in the disbursement of certain budget funds; funding of NGOs; and referenda in relation to citizens' initiatives.

The measures may well lead to greater participation, but careful evaluation is required of how they function in the system overall. They give the impression of participation, but the issue is the citizens' substantive participation. Democracy is ensured by the ability to act together, a process that gives the public the feeling that they are influencing events.

I will refer to one of the many suggestions that were mentioned – participatory democracy. More processes of debate, hearings and public discussions are recommended. These procedures ensure better legitimisation and greater acceptance of planned measures at the same time. But that is not enough in itself. There is still a great distance between state and citizen. What is needed above all is the assignment of projects, of specific missions to civil society, to the different organizations and the initiatives which constitute it. The transfer of powers must happen with imagination and method.

Not only where there is already such a tradition, but in as many fields as possible so as to reduce the distance between the citizens and faceless authority as much as possible.

Social welfare is a good example of where power has already been transferred. To a large extent, it is provided both in Greece and in other European countries with the assistance of NGOs and public institutions with strong public participation. A transfer of power can occur within the context of quality-of-life issues, such as environmental protection and the everyday protection of the public. For example, when making complaints about public transport or the police, citizens today, in Greece and abroad, must approach impersonal services that normally are not responsive to citizens' appeals. Their sense of the state's interest would be different if community welfare and public services had a council made up of consumers or other concerned individuals to whom they could communicate their demands. Giving people the sense that their voice is being heard would boost citizen representation in every municipality and city ward that undertook to further the task of responding to complaints at the local level.

These examples are based on two observations. The first, more general observation is that autocratic and authoritarian methods of administration should be replaced by methods that have agreement, dialogue with society and the finding of solutions that are widely accepted at their core. Indeed there are new issues, such as bioethics, which cannot be tackled unless dialogue determines first what is permissible and what is desirable.

The second observation concerns the level at which participation can be most productive. It is that which is closest to the public and to which, because of proximity, the public can make a greater contribution. It is the local, the everyday.

3. It is a commonplace that the mass media have acquired a role in contemporary democracy for which there is no constitutional provision. The press is widely seen as exercising the right of monitoring and supervision that rightly belongs to society. It should not impose policies, promote special interests, or exert its power in such a way as to dictate its choices to the government. The reality is very different. The media, in particular television, are a parallel power to the government. They influence the country's political and economic course. Television leads political parties to more dependency on economic capital and reinforces the plutocratic features of modern democracies. The monitor has become a co-wielder of power and therefore the monitoring process is deficient.

Attempts to curb the power of the media have been made in many countries, either through legislation limiting the concentration of ownership in the hands of a few, or by regulations concerning the abuse of power and the quality of television programmes. However, despite all these efforts, political life is already determined by a factor whose limits are hard to determine and remain unclear. Legal rules are not enough. Power is limited by power. Limits of action are determined by political forces in debate. The 'crisis in democracy' in this case results from the lack of political will to counter the power of the mass media. In their desire

to use the media for their own purposes, political parties have identified with them.

4. Often listed under the heading 'democratic deficit' are problems that have arisen and still do arise from restrictive measures introduced to combat illegal acts, in particular terrorism. One view holds that such measures endanger human rights.

There is not necessarily a contradiction between human rights and security. The security of the public is a good that democratic society protects. A lack of security may limit or negate human rights, but the elimination of all possible danger can lead to drastic limitations on human rights. A democratic society must agree to live with danger. It must aim at balancing the protection of both security and liberties. The measure of imposed and permissible limitations on human rights and security is not predetermined nor can it come from increasingly complex laws. It is a political issue and is determined by political processes. The higher the quality of democracy, the more convincing the demarcation. Here too, democracy is not in crisis. What we have is a political problem, conflicting views and the public debate that democracy requires.

5. A basic problem for democracy is the relation of any given country to the supranational co-operative bodies to which it belongs.

The constitutions of all European Union member states are subject to restrictions on the exercise of national sovereignty and permit the transfer of responsibilities to supranational bodies. What happens in the EU-member state relationship is in accordance with

the member states' constitutions and is not a limitation of democratic rights. Nevertheless there is a widely held view that unauthorised third parties make decisions for the people, who themselves have no way of influencing what happens in Brussels. Indeed, many believe that there is less democracy in the EU than in Greece. The nation state seems more familiar to them, more accessible, more democratic. There they have channels of communication with state power. By contrast, supranational power is remote, impersonal and contact with it is probably impossible.

The distance between the new power and the people is not the only thing that accession to supranational bodies has increased. Many EU member states already operate differently from what has been constitutionally laid down and established. The balance of power between government and parliament has changed in favour of the former. It negotiates with the EU over directives, regulations, decisions and the distribution of funds. Parliaments in many EU countries are ill informed and have limited participation in the formation of policy. People realise that on issues that are crucial for them, such as agricultural funding, their representatives have no say.

Problems of democracy also arise, and to a great degree, at the supranational level. The EU's present mode of operation does not ensure democratic functioning to the desired level. For instance, despite the joint decision-making procedure, the European Parliament does not operate like national law-making bodies do. The European Commission is not a government elected by the

citizens of Europe. The EU's 'democratic deficit' is a real problem, an issue which needs to be seriously explored.

There is no easy solution to these problems. Democracy, both in the relations of the citizen of a member state to the EU, and within the EU itself, cannot be guaranteed by the models and rules that apply in the member states. The EU was formed in stages that did not always follow a coherent vision. For many people, the aim is to create a single European state that will replace the national states. Others do not accept this. Their aim is European cooperation without abolishing individual members' status and without obliterating national identities – confederation, in other words. The European practice of member states has usually followed the form of inter-governmental cooperation. The states aim at arrangements and regulations that ensure that the EU and its members operate together in agreed-upon frameworks. They do not accept unifying initiatives that would make the EU an autonomous pole of power.

At the same time, however, new forms of co-operation, which are not part of the federal or the inter-governmental approach, are being formed. The regional states of northern Germany are developing common projects with Denmark, Belgium and Luxembourg. They promote, through the cooperation of their social agencies, unity beyond what EU treaties stipulate. European universities create common operating rules on their own initiative. The individual state is ceasing to be the fundamental element in these solutions, since they are implemented by authorities that represent different territorial entities and spheres of action. Thus post-national reality has already led to 'multi-layer

governance' in an international context that goes beyond the conventional rules of hierarchy and co-operation. This new form of cross-governance is a means of compensating for an imposed but unrealised "unification".

Experience has shown that the future evolution of the EU will be marked by the retreat of individual states and the emergence of centralized power in Brussels and its regional collaborators. The lever for this process will continue to be the EU's central bureaucracy, the mechanism that foregrounds and formulates what it considers to be the common interests of the member states. Its field of action will be determined by loose inter-governmental collaboration agreements that are made periodically. This new centre will generate its own autonomy. At the same time, the democratic features of the EU will weaken. This is why a concerted effort is needed for as many member states and their citizens to participate in exercising European public power.

EU administration and inter-governmental bodies tend to deal with issues in a technocratic manner. They consider these issues to be the responsibility of Brussels bureaucrats and experts. The prime concern for EU employees is to find compromises to meet the wishes of the member states, and to accommodate the often divergent and contradictory national preferences. A common will usually emerges without any emphasis on conflicting political tendencies and ambitions. In fact, de-politicisation is seen to be advisable because it allows for the easy achievement of balances. This stance, however, does not favour public dialogue.

Reinforcing democracy demands a very different approach; it demands the accentuation of the political dimension, unconstrained public debate, and discussion of problems in an open forum. Common issues should be discussed before all national audiences. They should become citizens' issues too. In this way, information for all, transparency, control and accountability will be ensured. The European public space is the means by which the democratic deficit can be limited.

The creation of this forum is the task of forces that want a strong, democratic Europe. They must pursue it systematically and discuss simultaneously EU's issues in all countries so as to formulate common policies. Proposals for such joint action have been made, such as for a pan-European referendum on the acceptance of the draft constitution, for a Europe-wide joint mobilization for its acceptance, and for the election of the European Commission president by the European Parliament.

These proposals met the strenuous opposition of member states that did not want to go beyond the framework of inter-governmental co-operation and feared the limitation of their autonomy. But the consolidation of democracy at a supranational level necessitates searching for and exercising new forms of co-operation that respond to the new conditions of post-national reality.

6. This analysis shows that the indications of 'democratic crisis' that have been discussed so far do not prove that democracy as an

institution has come to an impasse. On the contrary, it shows that there are ways of adapting it to the new era.

It is hard to predict what shape democracy will take in the future, especially in terms of how the national and supranational levels will operate together. We lack knowledge of the social problems it will have to confront, of competing social and political forces and of the outcome of social struggles. But uncertainty about future events does not necessarily indicate a negative outcome. Although the way democracy functions today may not satisfy the public, liberties and citizen possibilities are in present Western Europe at a higher level than they were during the first half of the past century. Democracy has made progress, even though this progress was linked with intense clashes, conflicts, and periods of oppression and darkness.

Its future evolution will also be connected to show-downs, to the struggle of forces that aim to improve their position, to the broadening of democracy, especially at the social level. The solutions that emerge will improve the quality of democracy as long as they are part of a continuum of ideas, institutions and policies that buttress greater freedom, equality and solidarity.

There are dangers, of course. An ecological disaster or a massive influx of migrants from Africa and Asia to Europe could encourage autocratic tendencies in the EU. The power of the media and the influence television has on public opinion may foster the rise of liberal, market based oligarchies, Italy being a recent example.

The issue today is to ensure that safety valves are in place to prevent the future decline of democratic institutions. As mentioned above, what will play a decisive role in achieving this goal is a different politics from that on which the multiselective parties have concentrated. It is a politics that is not solely concerned with the acquisition and management of power, the techniques of moulding public opinion, and the organizing of repressive mechanisms, but with the essential problems of society and its citizens. It is a politicised politics in that it acts with social sensitivity in implementing specific, economically feasible measures, and in assessing their consequences and overall contribution towards development.

7. Democracy is not only about electoral processes, party rivalries and the pursuit of power. It has a crucial ethical dimension. It concerns people and their emancipation from bondage. It concerns the shaping of a society based on liberty, equality and solidarity. The life blood of democratic politics entails thinking, discussions and debates about values, principles and their application -about the continual improvement of rules that govern social life. If politics goes back to basics in a way that is visible to the public, then citizens will re-engage with the political process and realize the importance of political participation. Thus they can become active members of society, become aware of their social responsibility and support social change. We have a duty to ensure this participation and, in so doing, raise politics to a new level.