


Martin Henry | Democracy in distress

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"Democracy," *the 2016-2017 LAPOP Report* opens up in its introduction, *"is on the defensive in the Americas and around the world."* And *"among the mass public, scepticism is brewing over the extent to which democracy can succeed in delivering on citizens' expectations and improving the quality of their daily lives."*

Has democracy been oversold, and are its problems terminal?

Democracy viewed as periodically voting with universal adult suffrage for competing political parties to form the government is a relatively new experiment in governance. And it is inherently unstable. Unsuitable for certain kinds of societies and cultures, certainly those low on personal self-discipline, self-governance, strong ethical ideals, and a spirit of compromise and collaboration for a larger public interest. Unable to deliver on its promises against escalating expectations.

"The 2016-2017 AmericasBarometer taps into this simmering frustration" with this form of government that is supposedly "better than any other form of government".

Which takes me back to **Financial Gleaner** guest columnist Walter Molano's thoughtful piece on March 2 taking us 'Back to the classics' - the classics of political theory, that is. The American founding fathers, for example, were wary of mass democracy, and did not create a

pure democracy but a republic with carefully limited, or guided, democracy. And Plato dissected the dangers of ancient Greek-style democracy in his **Republic**, written 2,380 years ago.

Molano opened up his column by noting: *"Political commentators are constantly fretting about the crisis that democracies are facing around the world. They point to the rise of Donald Trump, Brexit and the unbridled power of Russian President Vladimir Putin."* All the results of majority votes in free and fair democratic elections, results that powerful and large minorities would prefer not to have. Then there is Maduro in collapsing Venezuela, elected by the popular vote.

"Latin America," Molano notes, "has had its share of potholes, including the Kirchners, Lula and Chavez. Traditional political party systems are crumbling around the region, from Chile to Costa Rica and Colombia. People are asking: How did this ever happen? Is political freedom at risk?"

Molano takes us back to **Federalist Paper Number 10**, in which James Madison strenuously argued for a political arrangement to "break and control the violence of faction" without destroying the liberty of the people.

By "faction", Madison meant "a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community".

The biggest faction

Although we have been trained not to think of them in this realistic way, political parties are the biggest factions in democracies. And we here in Jamaica are very familiar with their shenanigans and rabid partisanship, which have hobbled government in the general public interest and for the common good.

We see our political factions, or parties, abandoning the constitutionally constructed Parliament for private Vale Royal Talks to resolve issues of factionalism manufactured by them. And very few are alarmed at the implications for democratic constitutional governance - not even this newspaper with its history of defending democracy.

Madison floated, in theory, "two methods of curing the mischief of faction". One is to remove the cause. The other is to control its effects. The cause could be removed "by destroying the liberty which is essential for its existence", because "liberty is to faction what air is to fire", an absolute necessity for its existence. And this destruction of liberty is going to become a more and more pressing prospect as democracy unravels under the pressure of colliding and contending special interests. Madison said this cure is worse than the disease.

The other possibility for removing cause of faction, according to Madison, is "by giving every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests. "Impracticable", but a project that powerful factions vigorously pursue by denying and suppressing the freedom to be

different.

Democracy, as we have come to see, is mired in exactly a short-term view of government for the electoral cycle and the overwhelming pressure on competing political parties to win elections.

Pure Democracy

Madison argued that a 'pure democracy', by which he meant a direct participatory system of government, could find no cure "for the mischiefs of faction". He instead proposed a republic with representatives of the people elected for their wisdom, patriotism and love of justice and from diverse interests and in large enough numbers to be "proper guardians of the public weal".

Clearly, Madison did not envisage the ganging up of citizens as a party to capture elections.

He argues a point that resonates well with me. Small republics should have a disproportionately large number of representatives "in order to guard against the cabals of a few". We should increase the size of our House of Representatives to 90, with one representative for each bloc of 20,000 or 30,000 electors. And we should add a bloc of six 'independent' senators, taking the total to 27.

Madison proposed for the United States a large federal republic with a diversity of interests holding each other in check and balance. He did not conceive the federal government dominating, overriding, suppressing, and 'harmonising' state government. Nor would he have conceived what Walter Molano can see so clearly in hindsight now: factions, special-interest groups can be readily built across large republics using the tools of modern technology. And all that's needed to capture state power is 50 per cent of the votes, plus one.

The solution

Madison's "solution to the problem", Walter Molano sums up in his 'Back to the classics' column, was to create a sufficiently large republic with a multitude of factions competing against each other, such that none would gain the upper hand. So what happened? The symptoms are easy to see, but the causes are not so evident, Molano suggests.

"Technology probably played an important role. This is a process that has been under way for more than a century. Advances in communications and transportation technology have facilitated the creation of what Madison called majority factions. Radio and television allowed people with a common cause to aggregate. This was seen with the rise of populist leaders, such as Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini and Juan Peron."

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