

CHAPTER 4. *Forms of Government I*

THE ANCIENT GREEKS INVENTED THE democratic state. They also invented politics, a word which comes from their word for city, *polis*. There had long been governments of various sorts; the Greeks invented government by discussion among all citizens and majority voting. Theirs was direct democracy in which all citizens gathered in one place to debate and determine policy. Not all the Greek citystates were democracies, and democracies were always precarious. Of all the little democratic states, we know most about Athens, where democracy survived with some interruptions for 170 years. During this time, all the men born in Athens had the right to participate in government, but not women or slaves.

We call our system democracy but it is very different from Athenian democracy; ours is representative democracy. We are not regularly involved in the process of government. We vote every four years or so; we have the opportunity to complain and stage demonstrations and make submissions, but we do not directly vote on every issue that comes before the parliament.

If the people were directly in charge of our democracy, we know it would be a very different system from what we have. Of course not all the people could gather in one place but we could reproduce the Greek system if, on every issue, there was a referendum conducted on the internet. With such a system we know from the public-opinion polls that Australia would never have had a policy to bring migrants from countries other than Britain; there would definitely be no Asian migrants; we would almost certainly be hanging criminals and we might be flogging them as well;

overseas aid would probably not exist; single mothers would struggle to keep their pension; students would probably struggle to keep their benefits. So you might think it is as well that the ignorance and the prejudice of the people do not have free rein.

If you have come to that position you are now close to the view of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, the great Athenian philosophers, who had severe doubts about Athenian democracy and whose criticisms help us to understand how it operated. They complained that the people were fickle; they were indecisive; they were ignorant; they were easily swayed. Government is a fine art that requires wisdom and judgment, which are not the possession of all citizens. The philosophers would be much happier with our system of representative democracy. No matter what we say about our representatives, they are usually better educated and better informed than the people as a whole. Our politicians are guided by a civil service in which there are very able people. So the people do not rule directly and there is an input from those who are trained and reflective about the whole business of government. But Socrates, Plato and Aristotle would not call our system democracy.

The origins of Greek democracy lay in the army. As we examine the different forms of government we will notice a connection between the nature of military power and the nature of the state. In Athens there was no regular full-time army, no 'standing army' as the term is—an army in barracks that can be called on to fight at any time. In Athens, all the soldiers were part-time, but rigorously trained to fight

on foot in close formation. When war was declared, citizens left their normal business as tradespeople or farmers and constituted the army. The democratic assembly began its life as citizen-soldiers gathered together to get their marching orders from their leaders. The decisions about war or peace and tactics had already been made by the council of elders, the nobility of the tribe. They were then laid before the mass of the soldiers. The aim was to put them in the picture, to psych them up. The assembly of soldiers was not to debate the matter or to propose anything different; they were meant to shout their approval and sing their battle songs.

Gradually the assembly gained more power and eventually complete control. We don't know fully how this came about but since the state relied on the participation of its citizen-soldiers and since wars were very regular events, the soldiers were in a strong position. So the democracy began as a solidarity of fighting men. But it was also tribal. There were initially four tribes in Athens and they used to come together to fight as separate tribes. Tribes elected the offices of government and even when Athens became a more formal democracy and drew up electorates, you remained in your electorate for life, even if you moved to live somewhere else. So geography alone never seemed a strong enough bond; you had a lifelong tie with those you voted with.

* * *

DIRECT DEMOCRACY REQUIRED a great commitment from the people and a great faith in the people. The ideals of Athenian democracy were set forth by Pericles, the

leader of Athens, in a speech he gave at the burial of soldiers killed in a war against Sparta. This 'funeral oration' is recorded in *The Peloponnesian War* by the Athenian author Thucydides, the first historian who attempted to be objective and fair-minded. Thucydides' history was preserved in manuscript at Constantinople. In the Renaissance, 1800 years after it was written, it reached Italy and was translated into Latin and then into modern European languages. After Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, it is the most famous speech of a politician at a cemetery. Pericles' speech was much longer than Lincoln's. These are only extracts:

Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability which the man possesses.

When our work is over, we are in a position to enjoy all kinds of recreation for our spirits. There are various kinds of contests and sacrifices regularly throughout the year; in our own homes we find a beauty and good taste which delight us every day and which drive away cares.

Here each individual is interested not only in his own affairs but in the affairs of the state as well; even those who are mostly occupied with their own business are extremely well informed on general politics—this is a peculiarity of ours: we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all.

An open, cultivated society with committed, engaged citizens: this is an attractive ideal now to anyone who cares about democracy, even though we know that Athenian leisure and beauty rested on slavery and that sometimes citizens had to be herded into the assembly. However, the positive influence of Pericles' speech was long delayed. For centuries, the elite of Europe had not only their interests but also their education to warn them against democracy, since most of

the classical authors they read were hostile to it. So much so that in the early nineteenth century an English scholar and radical, George Grote, produced a new study of Greece to argue that the democracy and the high culture were inter-connected and you could not damn the one and accept the other. This was his contribution to the cause of democracy in England.

Even to us there are some aspects of Greek democracy that are at odds with our ideals. It was very communal and a touch coercive; there was little sense of individual rights. The privilege of an Athenian citizen was to belong—as Pericles said, if you are not interested in politics you have no business here. Our concern with individual rights has other origins.

Athens and all the other little Greek states lost their independence when Alexander the Great, the ruler of Macedonia in northern Greece, took them over early in the fourth century BC. Democracy was lost, but not the Greek culture that had flourished in Athens. It spread with Alexander's empire, which extended throughout the eastern Mediterranean and into the Middle East. What Alexander had made into a Greek world remained so when it was conquered by Rome and became the eastern, Greek-speaking half of its empire.

When Rome began its expansion, it was a republic but not a democracy. There were popular assemblies which began, like those in the Greek states, as a group of armed men. Every citizen in Rome had to fight and he had to supply his own equipment and weapons. You contributed according to your wealth. If you were rich, you supplied a horse and joined the cavalry, which was a fairly small section of

the Roman army. All the rest were foot soldiers but of different grades: the first came fully armed with a sword, a coat of mail and a shield; the next had less armour; the third had only a spear or a javelin; and the last class of infantry—the poorest people—could afford only a sling, a bit of cloth or leather with which you could hurl a stone.

In the early years the assembly was like an army on a parade ground. Men were drawn up in their different ranks: cavalry, first-class foot soldiers, second, third, fourth, down to the people with slings. The voting took place by groups. So all the cavalry decided their view of the matter by internal discussion; all the first-class infantry decided their view of the matter and so on. Each group expressed a joint opinion but their voting power was not equal. There were 193 votes overall and these were allocated to the groups according to their status. The cavalry and the first-class infantrymen together had 98 votes out of a possible 193 votes, which is a majority, though the bulk of the soldiers were in the lesser groups. If these first two groups agreed, there was no need even to ask the others and often they were not asked; the horsemen and the first-class soldiers had settled the matter. All men potentially at least participated, but the rich had the predominant voice.

This assembly elected the Roman consuls, who were the prime ministers of the republic; there were two of them and they could act only if they agreed. The two consuls controlled each other and their power was further limited by holding office for only one year. Romans identified the years by the persons who had been consuls.

Gradually the common people claimed more power for themselves as against the wealthy and the nobles. We do know how this happened—they used their military power to get it. A war would be declared and the common soldiers, ranks three, four and five, refused to fight. They said we will fight only if you give us more power in the state. They used that threat to obtain a new assembly, one which appointed officers called tribunes. Tribunes had power to intervene at any stage in the governmental process if an ordinary person was getting a raw deal. After another refusal to fight, this assembly was given a strong role in law-making.

Sometimes these actions are referred to as strikes, which is a poor word for them. Strikes suggest that this process was taking place in the sphere of industrial relations, that working people were being unionised in Rome and were calling strikes against their bosses. It was not like that at all. The common people staged a mutiny. Their opportunity came not out of industrial relations but international relations.

As in Athens, citizen-soldiers increased their power, except that in Rome democracy never fully triumphed. The chief body in Rome remained the Senate, which was composed of members from noble families and later more from wealthy families. The popular assemblies with their increased power put limits on the Senate but did not overawe or supplant it. The Roman constitution changed by the creation of new institutions and shifts in the relations of power, not by revolution and a fresh start. In this it was followed by the British constitution, which has still not been written down in one document. In its concern to have power dispersed

and checked, the Roman constitution was an important model for that of the United States.

* * *

THE ROMANS HAD FIRST BEEN RULED by kings. The republic was only established in about 500 BC when the Romans overthrew the tyrant king, Tarquin the Proud. The Roman historian Livy gives an account of this revolt. His work was preserved in western Europe after the fall of Rome but some of it had disappeared; only a single copy of one section survived and was not discovered until the sixteenth century, so it remained unknown to Renaissance scholars. The section dealing with the establishment of the republic was known. Shakespeare drew on it for his poem 'The Rape of Lucrece'.

It was a rape that sparked the republican revolt. The rapist was not Tarquin himself but his son, Sextus Tarquinius. His victim was Lucretia, the wife of Collatinus. The leader of the revolt that expelled the king was Brutus, who was a nephew of the king. His namesake 400 years later led the plot to assassinate Julius Caesar. The first Brutus had seen many of his family killed by Tarquin the Proud. To survive, Brutus had pretended to be a sort of half-wit, otherwise Tarquin would have done away with him as well. Brutus was being true to his name, which in Latin means 'dull-witted'. He made no complaint when Tarquin seized all his property. He was biding his time and his opportunity came with the rape of Lucretia. This is the story as Livy tells it. It begins when the sons of the king are away from Rome at Ardea fighting a war. Collatinus was drinking with them in their tent when they

started to talk about their wives, with each boasting that his wife was the best. Collatinus suggested that they settle the matter by riding back to Rome to check on what their wives were doing. The wives of the princes were found partying, but Lucretia was hard at work, spinning. Collatinus had won the argument. A few days later, Sextus, without Collatinus's knowledge, returned to visit Lucretia.

He was hospitably welcomed in Lucretia's house and, after supper, escorted, like the honoured visitor he was thought to be, to the guest chamber. Here he waited till the house was asleep and then, when all was quiet, he drew his sword and made his way to Lucretia's room determined to rape her. She was asleep. Laying his left hand on her breast, 'Lucretia,' he whispered, 'not a sound. I am Sextus Tarquinius, I am armed—if you utter a word I will kill you. Lucretia opened her eyes in terror; death was imminent, no help at hand. Sextus urged his love, begged her to submit, pleaded, threatened, used every weapon that might conquer a woman's heart. But all in vain; not even the fear of death could bend her will. 'If death will not move you,' Sextus cried, 'dishonour shall. I will kill you first, then cut the throat of a slave and lay his naked body by your side. Then everyone will believe that you have been caught in adultery with a servant and paid the price.' Even the most resolute chastity could not have stood against this dreadful threat.

Lucretia yielded. Sextus enjoyed her and rode away, proud of his success.

The unhappy girl wrote to her father in Rome and to her husband in Ardea, urging them both to come at once with a trusted friend and quickly, for a frightful thing had happened. Her father came with Valerius, her husband with Brutus, with whom he was returning to Rome when he was met by the messenger. They found Lucretia sitting in her room in deep distress. Tears rose to her eyes as they entered and to her husband's question, 'Is it well with you?' she answered, 'No, what can be well with a woman who has lost her honour? In your bed, Collatinus, is the impress of another man. My body only has been violated; my heart is innocent and death will be my witness. Give me your solemn promise that the adulterer shall be punished. He is Sextus Tarquinius. He is who last night came as my enemy disguised as my guest and took his pleasure of me. That pleasure will be my death—and his too if you are men.'

The promise was given. One after another they tried to comfort her, they told her she was helpless and therefore innocent, that he alone was guilty. It was the mind, they said, that sinned, not the body: without intention there could never be guilt.

'What is due to him,' Lucretia said, 'is for you to decide. As for me, I am innocent of fault but I will take my punishment. Never shall Lucretia provide a precedent for unchaste women to escape what they deserve.' With these words she drew a knife from under her robe, drove it into her heart and fell forward, dead. Her father and her husband were overwhelmed with grief. While they stood weeping helplessly, Brutus drew the bloody knife from Lucretia's body and holding it before him cried: *'By this girl's blood—none more chaste till a tyrant wronged her—and by the gods I swear that with sword and fire and whatever else can lend strength to my arm, I will pursue Lucius Tarquinius the Proud, his wicked wife and all his children, and never again will I let them or any other man be king in Rome.'*

Brutus was true to his word. So the republic was launched because of an outrageous crime by a prince; because a woman, like a good Roman, valued her honour more highly than her life; and because one man was determined to avenge her. But not everyone in Rome wanted Tarquin off the throne and there was a conspiracy to bring the king back. When the conspiracy was uncovered, Brutus was one of the first two consuls, the office-holders who had replaced the king. Brutus was sitting in the public assembly, in the seat of judgment, when the names of the conspirators were brought before him. On the list were two of his sons. It was Brutus's job to pass sentence of punishment on them. People in the crowd yelled out that they did not want his family to be so dishonoured; that he could pardon his sons. But Brutus would not hear of it; the same rule was going to apply to his sons as to everyone else. So while Brutus watched, his sons were stripped naked, flogged and then beheaded. He did not flinch. Such was his devotion to the republic.

The Romans of course praised Brutus; this is the very essence of devotion to the republic: that you will put all personal and private ties aside and serve the public good. This is what the Romans called *virtus*, republican virtue, necessary if the republic was to survive without the tie of allegiance to a king. You might think that Brutus was inhuman; how could he sit there and have that done to his own children? This republican virtue created monsters.



Jacques-Louis David, The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons, 1789.

Strangely, just before the revolution in France, there was a cult of admiration for republican Rome—and not just among those who wanted to reform the monarchy. The court painter to Louis XVI, Jacques-Louis David, took as his subjects two famous episodes from Livy. In the first he depicted Brutus not in the judgment seat condemning his sons, but at home when the decapitated bodies were brought in. This allowed David to contrast the unmoved, implacable father staring straight ahead with the weakness of women, the mother and sisters of the deceased, who are weeping over their loss. David's second tribute to republican virtue was the painting called *The Oath of the Horatii*.

The Horatii were the three sons of Horatius who were chosen to fight as champions of Rome when Rome and one of its enemies resolved not to fight in battle but to allow their dispute to be settled by three men from each side fighting each other. David, in his painting, shows the father swearing his sons to their allegiance to Rome. They are placing their hands on their swords and raising their

arms in the republican salute, which took the same form as the Nazi salute. The women—the mother and the sisters of the soldiers—again display their human weakness by weeping as the young men depart. The sister is particularly distressed because she is engaged to one of the champions who is going to fight for the other side.



Jacques-Louis David, The Oath of the Horatii, 1784.

It was a ferocious, terrifying battle, a battle to the death, wonderfully described by Livy. Only one man survives, one of the sons of Horatius, so Rome has won. The victor comes home and finds his sister crying because her fiancé is dead, killed by her brother. The brother takes out his sword and runs it through his sister; kills her, for weeping when she should have been rejoicing at his own and Rome's success. Again the message is that family has to be sacrificed in the service of the state. The brother is put on trial but is quickly found to be not guilty. The father turns up at the trial, criticises his daughter, and so helps to free his son.

* * *

THE ROMAN REPUBLIC LASTED for a couple of hundred years and then it began to fall into disorder. Rome had expanded; its great generals who had made its conquests became rivals and began to fight each other. Their soldiers were loyal to them rather than to the republic. One great general emerged and conquered all the others: Julius Caesar. The second Brutus organised the assassination of Caesar to save the republic from one-man rule, but that deed simply led to another round of civil wars between Brutus and his fellow conspirators on one side and the friends of Caesar on the other. One man emerged victorious: Caesar's great-nephew and adopted son, who in 27 BC made himself into Rome's first emperor under the name Augustus.

Augustus was very astute. He kept the republican institutions; the assemblies still met and consuls were still elected. He called himself not 'emperor' but 'first citizen'. He saw his job as a sort of facilitator, or he pretended he was a facilitator, just helping the machinery to work properly. There was no great pomp; he did not have a great escort; he walked around Rome like an ordinary citizen without a bodyguard; he went into the Senate, which was still meeting, and listened to the debates; he was personally very accessible. The form of greeting and the way you showed your allegiance remained the raised-arm salute. When you came into Augustus's presence you did not have to bow or show any deference; you and the emperor saluted each other.



Augustus became Rome's first emperor in 27 BC.

Augustus tried to revive the old Roman virtues. He thought Rome had been undermined by luxury and decadence; he wanted to restore, as we would say, family values. He banished the poet Ovid for writing that women who had children were no longer so beautiful. He was critical of Livy, the historian, who was writing at this time, because he did not like some of what Livy had written about the disputes in Rome's recent past, but he was with Livy on the Roman virtues: noble conduct and devotion to the state. But one Roman practice he could not revive. Rome now had an empire which Augustus stabilised and ruled well but with the help, not of part-time citizen-soldiers, but of a paid standing army.

For two centuries the empire enjoyed peace. Over its vast area, Roman law and Roman order prevailed. In form the empire was still a republic: emperors did not become like kings whose heirs would be kings after them. The emperor chose a successor, who might or might not be a relative, and the Senate would approve the choice. Later there would be bloody conflicts between rival claimants, but for two centuries emperors mostly chose well and their choice was accepted.

Then in the third century AD came the first wave of German invasions, which

nearly brought the empire down. After the invasions had passed, the empire was reconstructed on new lines by two emperors, Diocletian and Constantine. To shore up the empire's defences they enlarged and re-organised the army, recruiting many of the Germans who had settled within the borders. To pay for a larger army, the emperors had to raise taxes. To ensure that people paid their taxes, they had to have a more accurate registration of the population. So the bureaucracy grew and the bureaucrats became the direct rulers of the empire. In earlier times the different regions were allowed to run themselves so long as peace was kept and taxes paid.

Diocletian attempted to control inflation by making death the punishment for raising prices. Taxes went up to pay for a larger army but if you were in business you were not allowed to raise your prices to help pay for the taxes. So you might think it is not worth being in business anymore. Diocletian had an answer for that: you were obliged to stay in your business and your son had to carry on the business after you. The emperors were now desperate; they were not ruling a society but dragooning it. A society governed in this way did not have the resilience or morale to resist the next wave of invasions.

Constantine's official support for Christianity in 313 was part of the attempt to strengthen the empire. The strength he sought did not lie in the church as an organisation; Christianity had grown but it was still a minority faith. Constantine, like many of his subjects, was losing faith in the old Roman gods and he came to believe that the Christian god would best protect him and the empire. At first he had only the vaguest idea of what being a Christian entailed, but he thought that if

he supported the Christians then their god would favour him.

Diocletian, Constantine and the later emperors became increasingly remote. They began to imitate the Persian emperors and to present themselves as god-like figures. They stayed in their palaces; they were never seen walking around their cities as Augustus had. Before you went into visit them, you were frisked. You were taken blindfolded through a great labyrinth of passages so you would never know your way in again, in case you had it in mind to assassinate the emperor. When finally you got to see the emperor you had to prostrate yourself; that is, you lay flat on the floor before the throne.

As Rome exerted tighter control, its subjects sought ways to escape. The great landowners, not wanting to pay tax themselves, became islands of resistance, protecting also the people who worked their lands. In the early years of the empire, these were slaves. When the supply of slaves dried up—because Rome's conquests had ceased—the landowners divided up their lands and rented them out to slaves, exslaves and free men who sought their protection. Though the landowners resented (and avoided) paying taxes to the later emperors, they embraced the emperors' new laws that people had to stay where they were and that any tenant seeking to move could be chained up. The tenants of different origins were coming to assume the same status—they were becoming what were known in the Middle Ages as serfs. They were not owned like slaves, they had their own plot of ground and a family, but they could not leave and were bound to work for and support their lord.

Medieval society was taking shape before 476 AD, the date we give for the fall of the empire in the west. There were already great landowners living in fortified houses, the masters and protectors of the people who worked their lands. The societies that replaced the empire in the west were to be held together by personal allegiance, not allegiance to the state, whether republic or empire. But Roman rule had a continuous afterlife in the memory of Europe.

| | MILITARY ORGANISATION | POLITICAL CONTEXT | FORM OF GREETING |
|-----------|----------------------------|--|-------------------|
| CLASSICAL | Citizen-soldiers | 500 BC Greek democracy Roman Republic | Republican salute |
| | Paid foot soldiers | 27 BC Augustus, first Roman Emperor | Republican salute |
| | Paid foreign foot soldiers | Diocletian, Constantine, Late empire 476 Fall of Rome | Prone |

