

Are we past caring about democracy?

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At the age of 66, this weeks general election will be the fifteenth to which I paid significant attention, and only the twelfth in which I have been able to vote.

I make the point because it makes clear how inadequate the idea that democracy is represented by a universal right for adults to participate in general elections really is. By this definition, democracy only relates to the periodic ability to turn a party out of office, which will happen for only the fourth time in my voting life in this election. That appears to be a wholly inadequate expression of the idea of democracy, even if we extend that idea to the ability to vote in local elections.

Aside from the obvious fact that this ability to very occasionally change the government is constrained by our inadequate electoral system and the ability that our elected politicians have to gerrymander and manipulate it, there has to be a lot more to democracy than just voting, or the concept is entirely meaningless.

Democracy should. I suggest, be about accountability. More than anything else, that should accountability by the government to parliament, and in turn, those in parliament should be accountable to those who elected them. Both conceots appear to be extraordinarily absent in the UK at present.

As demonstration of this, at the most basic level, the last government was contemptuously unaccountable to both parliament and those who elected it because it was incredibly late in preparing its own accounts, and when it did so for 2022 ([which are the last set of account available](#)), the National Audit Office had to qualify its opinion on those accounts and express doubt as to whether they represented a true and fair view of the government's activities precisely because of a lack of data being supplied to enable their preparation by so many of the organisations for which the government was responsible. As a result, the accounts were incomplete.

If one of the most basic tasks of government is to command resources for the benefit of those it serves, then the government's inability to prepare accounts showing what resources it has commanded and how it has used them must be one of the surest

indications of that failure of accountability and of democracy itself.

As is clear, however, the basic contempt for accountability implicit within this situation is commonplace right across government. For example, not only are freedom of information requests frequently dismissed, or are not answered on the grounds of cost, but when parliament itself seeks to hold the ministers recruited from its own ranks to account, the contempt that they show towards those asking questions of them is quite extraordinary. Whether we look at the performance of ministers at the dispatch box or when addressing Parliamentary committees, ministers frequently evade questions asked of them. The same is true of questions posed by the media. What almost all ministers reveal is that they either have no interest in or seek to disregard the whole concept of accountability. That undermines democracy.

That is a process encouraged by the whipping system, which forces members of the governing party to go along with this. In that context, whipping is deeply anti-democratic.

The lack of accountability of MPs to their electorate also undermines democracy. Few can be recalled. Most seats are usually incredibly predictable as to their party occupant, and the likely events of this week are incredibly rare. As a result, the first-past-the-post system encourages contempt for accountability.

Altogether, then, we have a system of democracy that is rotten, unaccountable and deeply unrepresentative.

Do we really have to suffer this?

Shouldn't we expect better?

And why don't we? Are we all so indifferent? Or are we, like politicians themselves, just past caring?