Funding the Future

When a president says the quiet part out loud

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Donald Trump said things at an event to mark the 250th anniversary of the US Declaration of Independence that deserve attention.

Amongst his many partisan claims at an event that should have been anything but that, he argued that the US Congress should abolish the filibuster so that they could pass what he calls the SAVE America Act, which has the deliberate intention of making it harder to vote in the USA. If they did so, he claimed, Republicans would “not lose an election for a hundred years.”

At the same time, he portrayed the Democratic Party as little more than a vehicle for communists, criminals, illegal immigrants and people who do not want to work.

Most reporting has treated these remarks as another example of Trump’s exaggerated rhetoric, misplaced timing, and inappropriate claims in the run-up to the US midterm elections later this year, but I think that misses the point.

Sometimes politicians tell us exactly what they intend. I think Trump did.

The remarkable thing was not the language about communists. American, and most especially Republican, politics has a long history of that sort of accusation, most notably during the 1950s McCarthyite era. I think most people in the US - the MAGA apart - realise this and can appreciate just how absurd these claims are.

What was most egregious was Trump’s claim that changing the rules of the electoral system could ensure that one party remained in office for a century at a time when the US is supposedly celebrating 250 years as a multi-party democracy, during which period it has stood up for its version of democracy as the core feature of the American way of life.

To contextualise that, most people would agree that the purpose of democracy is not to guarantee that the right of any one group of people to win elections. It is to ensure that governments always know they can lose them.

That uncertainty is not a flaw in democracy. It is a defining characteristic that governments know that they survive only with the continuing consent of the people who put them in power. If they fail that continuing support, democracy ensures that the public has the right to dismiss them. Every democratic election is, then, a reminder that power is held on trust, and never owned.

In that case, the moment a government begins designing a system of power intended to prevent itself from losing office, as Trump says he is doing, something fundamental changes. Government no longer exists to serve the people. Instead, the people begin to exist to sustain the government, at least in that government's view. And this, of course, is what fascism is all about, and that is why Trump’s remarks matter.

Whether or not his proposed legislation could actually achieve what Trump claims is almost beside the point in that case. He has explained what success looks like from his perspective. His definition of success is not in persuading voters to support Republicans for the next hundred years. Hw thinks success comes from changing the system so that Republicans do not, and maybe cannot, lose for the next hundred years. Those are very different ambitions.

That recontextualises the language about what he calls the "communist threat". This too is not accidental, and it is not just McCarthyism reborn. It belongs in another tradition. Those seeking to weaken democratic institutions have rarely begun by admitting they wish to reduce democracy. Instead, they first redefine their opponents in the classic fascist style. Political rivals cease to be people with different opinions. They become enemies of the nation itself. They are portrayed as so dangerous that normal democratic rules supposedly no longer apply.

Once that argument is accepted, extraordinary measures begin to look reasonable. That is precisely why this language matters.

I spend much of my time writing about tax, government spending, public investment and the role of the state. All of those debates, however, depend upon one prior condition. Governments must remain accountable to the people they govern. Without that accountability, every power the state possesses, including its power to create money, tax, regulate and spend, becomes capable of serving those who hold office instead of those who elected them.

Democracy is therefore not simply another political institution. It is the mechanism that keeps every other institution answerable to society.

That is why apparently constitutional and political questions matter so much. It is easy to dismiss them as the tittle tattle of the day, but with people like Trump and the UK's fascists talking, that is a mistake. They determine how power is exercised and who can challenge it. They are the supposed guardrails that prevent governments from confusing their own interests with those of the people.

There is nothing sacred about the Senate filibuster. Reasonable people can disagree about whether it is a good constitutional device. But abolishing it because a president believes doing so will allow his party never to lose power again is not constitutional reform in any meaningful sense of the word.

Reform improves institutions so that they better serve the people.

Entrenchment changes institutions so that they better serve those already in power.

The difference is profound. Everything I argue for here depends upon the existence of governments that remain accountable, and if the US succumbs to Trump, the consequences will flow, including to the UK.

I want governments capable of investing in people, tackling climate change, rebuilding public services, reducing inequality and helping everyone realise their potential. None of that matters if governments cease to believe they can legitimately be removed from office.

A government that accepts it may lose an election remains the servant of the people.

A government that seeks to make defeat impossible has begun to make itself the master of the people.

It is fascist, in other words.

Donald Trump has now said, in remarkably clear terms, what he thinks political success looks like. We should take him seriously, not because we know he will achieve what he wants, but because he has told us plainly what he wants to achieve, and that in itself is objectionable and a call to action.