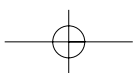
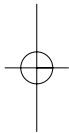
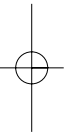
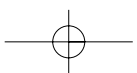
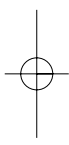
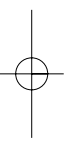
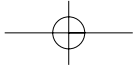


## SECTION 1

# Key Ideas Underlying Citizenship Education







# Democracy

Bernard Crick

Democracy is both a sacred and a promiscuous word. We all love her but we see her differently. She is hard to pin down. Everyone claims her but no one can possess or even name her fully. To give any definition for a class to learn would not be particularly democratic. To have any open-ended discussion about possible meanings could be reasonably democratic. Perhaps like 'Britishness' it is more a matter of recognizable behaviour over time than of definitive definition for a precise curricular moment. Besides, definitions don't settle arguments. 'Democracy' can suggest certain institutional arrangements or it can suggest authorities or individuals behaving in a democratic manner. To some it means that the will of the majority must prevail; but to many others it is simply a synonym for good or just government – which may some have to contradict and restrain majority opinion. Not every decision can be judged by whether it is reached democratically reached or not. BBC news programmes, in the UK, ask listeners to send in their opinion on road-pricing for motor vehicles or on the provision of a super-expensive new drug in the National Health Service, but this is an illusion of democracy, perhaps better called populism, not how representative government is best

conducted trying to mediate between opinion and knowledge, majorities and minorities.

A moment's thought or reading a short book could remind us why the concept, while so important, is yet so often so confusing, even sometimes dangerously misleading (Crick, 2002). Some world leaders recently assumed that if an oppressive and intolerant autocracy was destroyed, democracy would automatically follow. But the concept that we take so much for granted has had, at its best, an essential historical and logical precondition: the idea of politics itself, practiced in what we would regard as pre-democratic societies; politics as a willingness both to offer and to accept compromises binding on both governments and majorities.

Historically 'democracy' has had four broad usages, each of which can be invoked as the *real* meaning even today. History is not a dead past but conditions how we understand the present and the future. There are no real meanings, only different usages of concepts; some more acceptable than others, some less self-contradictory or more compatible with others. The report that led to Citizenship becoming a compulsory part of the national curriculum in England was titled *Education for Citizenship and the*

*Teaching of Democracy in Schools* (Advisory Group: 1998); but noticeably offered no explicit definition or even extended discussion of 'democracy'; rather it chose to concentrate on 'citizenship', especially *active* not just *good* citizenship, 'participation', 'rights and responsibilities'.

The first historical usage is found in Plato's attack on democracy and in Aristotle's highly qualified defence: democracy is simply, in the Greek, *demos* (the many, or more often invidiously 'the mob') and *cracy*, meaning rule. Plato attacked democracy as being the rule of the poor and ignorant over the educated and the knowledgeable, ideally philosophers. His fundamental distinction was between knowledge and opinion: democracy is rule, or rather the anarchy, of mere opinion. Even in modern times this view has some resonance. Beatrice Webb, a democratic socialist, once said 'democracy is not the multiplication of ignorant opinions.' Aristotle modified Plato's view rather than rejecting it utterly: good government was a mixture of elements, the educated few ruling with the consent of the many. The few should have '*aristoi*' or the principle of excellence from which the highly idealized concept of aristocracy derives. But many more can qualify for citizenship by virtue of some education and some property (both of which he thought necessary conditions for citizenship), and so must be consulted and can, indeed, on occasion be promoted to office. He did not call his 'best possible' state democracy, rather *politea* or polity, a political or civic community of citizens deciding on common action by public debate. But democracy could be the next best thing in practice if it observed 'ruling and being ruled in turn'. As a principle unchecked, however, by aristocratic experience and knowledge democracy was a fallacy: 'that because men are equal in some things, they are equal in all'. The citizen class in Athens in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC excluded women, the propertyless, foreigners and there were slaves. Citizens were a minority but they made decisions by public debate, chose officials by vote or by lot, and had forcibly resisted and overthrown rule by tyrants or narrow oligarchies (Farrar: 1988).

The second usage is found in the Roman Republic, in Machiavelli's great republican Discourses, in 17<sup>th</sup> century English and Dutch republicans, and in the early American republic: that good government is mixed government, just as in Aristotle's theory, but under constitutional law – laws that could only be made and changed by a special procedure not a simple majority vote. But a democratic popular element could actually give greater power to a state. The plebeians, the common people of Rome, elected tribunes to represent them in the aristocratic Senate. Good laws to protect all were not good enough unless subjects became active citizens making their own laws collectively. When Oliver Cromwell at the end of the English Civil War argued in the Putney Debates for a property franchise, one of his colonels, a Leveler, famously hurled back in his face: 'The poorest he that is in England has life to live as the greatest he' (but beneath the rhetoric even Colonel Rainborough believed that servants, debtors and tenants could not have the vote because they would lack 'independency', would be in the power of another). The republican argument was both moral and military. The moral argument is the more famous: both Roman paganism and later Protestantism had in common a view of man as an active individual, a maker and shaper of things, not just a law-abiding well-behaved subject of a traditional rule-bound monarchical or religious order. But also it was believed that free citizens would defend their state from aggressors more strongly and reliably than professional soldiers or mercenaries.

The third usage of democracy is found in the rhetoric and events of the French Revolution and in the writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau – that everyone, regardless of education or property, has a right to make his or her will felt in matters of state; and indeed the 'general will' or common good is better understood by any well-meaning, simple, unselfish and natural ordinary person from their own experience and conscience than by the over-educated living amid the artificiality of high society. Now this view can have a lot to do with the liberation of a class or a nation, whether from oppression or

ignorance and superstition, but it is not necessarily connected with individual liberty. (In the European 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries most people who cared for liberty did not call themselves democrats at all – rather constitutionalists or civic republicans, or, in the Anglo-American discourse, ‘Whigs’). In the French Revolution the Jacobins turned Rousseau’s ideas into the slogan ‘the sovereignty of the people’ they spoke of ‘Our Sovereign Masters, the People.’ The difficulty was that they exercised sovereignty on behalf of whom they took to be ‘the people’ with no clear representative institutions to check them. The general will could have more to do with popularity than with representative institutions, the rule of law or individual rights. Napoleon was a genuine heir of the French Revolution when he said that ‘the politics of the future will be the art of stirring the masses’. His popularity was such, playing on both revolutionary and nationalist rhetoric, that he was able for the very first time to introduce mass conscription – that is to trust the common people with arms. The autocratic Hapsburg’s and Romanovs had to be most careful to whom and where they applied selective conscription.

The fourth usage of democracy is found in the American constitution and in many of the new constitutions in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the new West German and Japanese constitutions following the Second World War, also in the writings of John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville: that all can be active citizens if they care, but must mutually respect the equal rights of fellow citizens within a regulatory legal order that defines, protects and limits those rights. So what is generally meant by ‘democracy’ today, especially in the US, Europe and countries influenced by their political ideas, is the fusion of the idea of the power of the people and the idea of legally guaranteed individual rights. Sometimes this fusion can be confusion. The two should, indeed, be combined, but they are distinct ideas, and can in practice contradict each other. There can be intolerant democracies and reasonably tolerant autocracies. It may not be helpful to call the system of government under which we live ‘democratic’ without qualification or pause for

thought. To do so begs the question. It can close the door on discussion of how the actual system could be made *more* democratic, just as others once feared – and some still do so – that the democratic element can become too powerful. For many years the Reverend Ian Paisley, in Northern Ireland, proclaimed it undemocratic to stop the majority in an elected parliament from ruling over the Catholic minority. It took him a long time to accept such an artificial and imposed political device as power-sharing; and any system of proportional representation is a deliberate check on majoritarian democracy.

Sociologically and socially England is still in many ways a profoundly undemocratic society (Scotland and Wales are perhaps somewhat more democratic), certainly when compared to the US – but even in the US there is now very little active citizenship or positive participation in politics in the republican style of the early American Republic. There are some interesting but very localized experiments in direct democracy, local referenda and ‘citizenship panels’ etc, and of course people vote (albeit in perpetually disappointing numbers) in formal elections; but between elections talk about and active participation in politics rates far lower as the most favoured national activity, apart from work, than shopping. (Lipset: 1996). But institutionally we know what we mean by calling Britain and the US democracies: institutional procedures protected by law and custom allow public debate, freedom of the press and free and fair elections so that presidents, governments and representatives can be changed peaceably. But that is a different matter to behaving democratically: treating everyone one as worthy of equal respect even when unequal in talent or status. All opinions are to be respected (to a varying degree) but not all can be judged of equal worth.

Aristotle said that as part of the good life, to fulfill our humanity, we must enter into the *polis* as citizens, into political relationships with other citizens. ‘To be political, to live in a *polis* meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through violence ... in Greek self-understanding to force people by violence, to command rather

than persuade, were prepolitical ways ... characteristic of life outside the *polis*.' (Arendt, 1958: 26–27). What we mean by politics and citizenship has been shaped by the Aristotelian tradition of thought. Politics is an activity among free men living as citizens in a state or *polis*, how they govern themselves by public debate. To him the special sense of *polis* or civic state was that of a conditional teleological ideal: both a standard and a goal to which all states would naturally move if not impeded, as well they might be impeded, by folly, unrestrained greed, power-hunger by leaders lacking civic sense, or by conquest. Aristotle brings out the intense specificity of the political relationship when, in the second book of *The Politics*, he examines and criticizes schemes for ideal states. He says that his teacher Plato made the mistake in *The Republic* of trying to reduce everything in the *polis* to an ideal unity; rather, it is the case that:

... there is a point at which a polis, by advancing in unity, will cease to be a polis: there is another point, short of that at which it may still remain a polis, but will none the less come near to losing its essence, and will thus be a worse polis. It is as if you were to turn harmony into mere unison, or to reduce a theme to a single beat. The truth is that the polis is an aggregate of many members (Barker, 1958: 51).

So politics arises in organized societies that recognize themselves to be an aggregate of many members, not a single tribe, religion, interest or even tradition. It can be defined as the activity by which the differing interests and values that exist in any complex society are conciliated (Crick, 2005: 3–5). Democratic politics are a device for such conciliation needed in modern industrial and post-industrial society. Politics only arises when there is a perception of diversities as natural and a tolerant democratic politics when that perception is widely shared. But historically and logically politics preceded what in the modern world is usually called democracy. Ruling elites in 5<sup>th</sup> century Greece and in republican Rome did act politically among themselves (democratically, if you like), even while the majority of inhabitants were shut out of political activity – just like in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain.

Not all regimes that style themselves democratic are democratic in any sense other than that a majority of the people accept the regime and may, indeed, be proud of it – as when the ‘peoples’ democracies of the former Communist world had survived war and were in working order, or in many African, South-East Asian and South American regimes today inspired (if sometimes deceived by) intense nationalism. It is bad mistake to assume that all dictatorships were and are unpopular, even if in our eyes their leaders subvert political compromises and individual liberties by appealing to the masses against traditional institutions and restraints.

Consider by way of contrast to even the best democratic practices of today a passage from an ancient author that in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries ‘every school boy knew’, or so it was said; certainly all those who thought seriously about politics – the Periclean oration.

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, every one 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. No one, so long as he has it in him to be of service to the state, is kept in political obscurity because of poverty. ...

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. We Athenians, in our own persons, take our decisions on policy or submit them to proper discussions: for we do not think that there is an incompatibility between words and deeds; the worst thing is to rush into action before the consequences have been properly debated ... (Rieu: 1954, 117–119).

But historians now tell us that Pericles was a populist demagogue, a kind of democratic dictator. And today to say ‘a man who minds his own business ... has no business here at all’ would be seen as a dangerous denial of

individual rights. But, that point apart, the ideal is eternally impressive that Pericles had to invoke to persuade and deceive his fellow citizens.

There is little need to search further if we want to find the moral and practical basis for an inclusive, just society: Alexis de Tocqueville wrote his great book *Democracy in America* to convince conservative, autocratic Europeans that following the ideas and forces released by the French Revolution, the future lay with democracy whether they liked it or not. It held a great capacity for human betterment, but it could, if there were no internal checks and balances, degenerate into 'a tyranny of the majority' or a 'democratic despotism'. His argument was balanced. The famous chapter on 'The Unlimited Power of the Majority ...', which could lead to intolerance, conformity and mediocrity, was thankfully followed by a chapter on 'Causes Which Mitigate the Tyranny of the Majority ...' (Bradley, 1945: 254–280). The main causes were the dispersal of power: the federal system itself and the strength of democratic local institutions. A whole theory of political sociology emerged stressing the importance of intermediary institutions between the individual and the state, what Adam Smith and his contemporary Adam Ferguson in the Scottish enlightenment had earlier called 'civil society'. If Rousseau had been right to search for some justification why everyone should be a citizen regardless of rank or education, yet he was wrong to suggest in his theory of the General Will to argue that all intermediary groups and institutions between the individual and 'the Legislator' (his selfless and benign state) are divisive of the general interest. Jeremy Bentham had called intermediary groups 'sinister interests'; he was so concerned with sweeping away corrupt feudal and municipal relics that he seemed not to notice the abundance in Britain of more benign voluntary groups which we might see as the school of democracy.

de Tocqueville, however, saw another danger to liberty that could arise from the

very success of a democratic franchise and a contented people. He pictured democracy as:

... an innumerable multitude of men, all equal and alike, incessantly endeavoring to procure the petty and paltry pleasures with which they glut their lives. Each of them, living apart, is a stranger to the fate of all the rest; his children and his private friend constitute to him the whole of mankind.

Above this race of men stands an immense and tutelary power, which takes upon itself alone to secure their gratifications and to watch over their fate. That power is absolute, minute, regular, provident and mild. It would be like the authority of a parent if, like that authority, its object was to prepare men for manhood; but it seeks, on the contrary, to keep them in perpetual childhood ... For their happiness such a government willingly labours, but it chooses to be the sole agent and the only arbiter of that happiness; it provides for their security, foresees and supplies their necessities, facilitates their pleasures ...: what remains but to spare them all the care of thinking and all the trouble of thinking. (Bradley, 1945: 318)

An ideologically conservative view of the future welfare state? But it could remind us that the downside of one type of democracy, what we now call the consumer society and dumbing down, could be imagined by a political thinker long before its contemporary form and force.

Benjamin Constant in a once famous essay of 1820, 'The Liberty of the Ancients Compared to that of the Moderns', drew less rhetorically a distinction for a democratic age between two ideas of liberty:

The aim of the ancients was the sharing of social power among citizens of the same fatherland: this is what they called liberty. The aim of the moderns is the enjoyment of liberty in private pleasures; and they call liberty the guarantees accorded by institutions to these pleasures (Gauchet, 1997).

So if we see democracy as simply majority will and opinion, we must also see that to result in good government constrains, whether cultural or legal, have to be considered. Morality is the most general such limitation. Just as Adam Smith saw ordinary morality and trustworthiness in observing contracts as essential underpinnings of a market economy, so a well functioning democracy needs such common virtues. And beliefs in 'the rule' of law, human rights and working through established procedures to change laws (rather than

a president or prime minister simply appealing to public opinion) are parts of any sophisticated definition of democracy or necessary limitations on any simplistic definition.

In a modern democracy the politician must, of course, always be aware of the dangers of trying to ignore strong public opinion. But they must also be aware of the dangers of simply trying to flatter and follow public opinion at a given moment if it appears to be against the long term public interest or common good. The democratic politician must have the courage to stand up and argue back when the public is being urged by populist leaders (whether other politicians, preachers or press lords) to break laws or conventions democratically legitimated and designed to mediate compromises between the different interests and values that are characteristic of a modern state and a complex society. Pericles had said in his praise of democracy, 'the secret of liberty is courage'. The great American jurist, Oliver Wendell Holmes, a Justice of the Supreme Court, once said ironically, 'Democracy is what the crowd wants'. He was defending his view of constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech under the Bill of Rights against some repressive but highly popular anti-socialist legislation by a State legislature.

Sometimes democracy is 'what the crowd wants', but more often not. Populism can arise from the failure of intermediate institutions and experts to consider ordinary opinion at all; or when a political party, president or prime minister appears to treat the government machine and the institutions of state as their own property, rather than as a public trust. Populism is when it can be thought plausible to treat the diverse citizens of a state as if they were 'the people', a single entity with a common will or moral consensus (Crick, 2007). Both the broadcast media and the press are then tempted to present almost any ordinary sounding individual (the more ordinary the better) as if their opinions are typical of everyone. Populism is the simplification of democracy. Populism can be stirred – perhaps even should be stirred, on occasion – when a purely pragmatic, purely compromising

practice of politics lacks any sense of vision or moral purpose. '[When] too great a gap opens between haloed democracy and the grubby business of politics, populists tend to move onto the vacant territory, promising instead of the dirty world of party manoeuvring the shiny ideal of democracy renewed' (Canovan, 1999: 2–16). The practices of politics in a democracy can be as difficult as understanding in the classroom or seminar the different meanings of the concept; but as important and compellingly interesting to do so.

Nevertheless perhaps the shrewdest contemporary student of government, the American Robert Dahl, has suggested the following characteristics of the institutions of modern democracy: elected representatives with free, fair and frequent elections; freedom of expression and access to alternative, independent sources of information; autonomous associations, that is citizens must be free to combine together for a wide variety of purposes – including religion, interest groups and political parties; and inclusive citizenship – that no one permanently resident in a country should be denied rights available to citizens (Dahl, 1991; 1999). Perhaps one only needs to add as institutions the independence of the judiciary and respect for a professional and politically neutral bureaucracy. But it is men and women who work institutions and who must always decide whether or not to exert themselves as citizens to breathe into them the life of participative democracy.

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