



Following on from last issue ...

## Democracy the early years

Billy Kennedy provides Part 2

The first part of this article described how democracy began to emerge in Athens at the beginning of the 6th century BC after a crushing debt crisis that reached a head during the previous century. During this period the *dēmos*, the common people, had become so indebted to a small group of wealthy elite families that they were often compelled to sell members of their own families or even their own persons into slavery to pay their debts.

Around 590 BC Solon 'The Lawgiver' was appointed to calm the crisis and one of his most important acts was to outlaw the enslavement of citizens. The crisis was not laid to rest however and, especially due to the inequity of land distribution between rich and poor, a tyrant named Peisistratos was able to seize control of Athens by pledging to the *dēmos* that he was on their side and would champion their cause. He instituted a number of reforms that would be crucial to fully fledged democracy down the track and he oversaw what was considered a golden age by the rural *dēmos*.

Peisistratos' sons took power after his death in 527 but were driven out by a coalition of competing elite families in 511. As when a tyrant is evicted today without a clear succession plan (think Iraq or Libya) total chaos ensued in Attica as a range of elite families vied for control of the city and surrounding countryside. Some wanted to go back to the way things were, some wanted to become tyrants themselves, and amidst all this the vast number of politicized free peasants, the *dēmos*, were also asserting themselves.

Eventually the famous son of a very aristocratic family, a man named Cleisthenes, established himself as the champion of the *dēmos*. He set about carrying out a wholesale overhaul of all the institutions of the city-state and he put in place a framework for the distribution of power that was avant-garde, highly sophisticated and that gave power to the people in a very real and tangible way. The implementation of the reforms of Cleisthenes is one of the most important events in Western political history.

Cleisthenes did not only want to implement a wholesale transfer of power to the *dēmos*, he wanted to do so in a way that was carefully calculated, transparent, and with the goal of the proper circulation of power so that everybody got to have a turn at exercising it.

The system had to work both in the present and indefinitely into the future. So he established new political districts

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based around important villages throughout the Attic countryside, and he established ten new tribes and assigned all Athenians to one of them. He established a democratic executive council of 500 that was composed of fifty men drawn from each of the ten tribes with a representative quota system from each sub-district.

Cleisthenes also converted some of the most important official public positions to selection by lot instead of by election. Aristotle says that the most democratic form of selection for public office is by lot.

'By lot' literally means by putting names into a pot. Whoever wanted to stand for office would put their name into a pot and the person whose name was drawn out was the person who then held that office. They even invented a machine, a *kleroterion* to randomise the selection of citizens to office. So selection to office was not a popularity contest. Today we might think 'what if they were not qualified to execute their office properly?' But to the Athenians the fact that they were citizens, their citizenship itself, was all the qualification they needed for the business of steering the ship of state.

The Athenians were able to enshrine in their constitutional state the idea of the political equality of the citizen. Citizenship was defined by the principles of *isonomia* and *isegoria*, 'equal distribution' and 'equal speech'. The Greek *isos* means arithmetic equality (cf. *isobar*, *isometric*), so one man was exactly equal to another man. *Isonomia* refers to the equal distribution of power and *isegoria* refers to the equal right to stand up and address the citizen assembly. Anybody who wished to speak could speak by virtue of holding citizen status. This establishment of freedom of speech is another significant moment in the history of the Western political thought.

Now some have questioned how democratic Athens really was because there were people excluded from participation, for example foreigners, slaves, children, and most controversially today, women. However excluding certain people from the *dēmos*, (i.e. the people who can participate) is a decision that every democracy makes. Excluding certain people did not make the system undemocratic for



OX BEING LED TO SACRIFICE DURING THE PANATHENAIA. EVERY CITIZEN RECEIVED AN EQUAL SHARE OF THE BARBEQUED MEAT. PARTHENON FRIEZE, BY PHEIDIAS?, c.440BC, BRITISH MUSEUM

Athens, just as it does not make it undemocratic for Australia. There are plenty of people who live in Australia who do not have access to democratic rights in spite of residing here and this of course includes tourists, foreign students, refugees and many others who fall into various marginal categories.

For example, if it turned out that the only people who are included in the *dēmos* of Australia are the people who live in Braidwood and surrounds then we would all have citizenship and everybody outside would not have citizenship. As long as every single member of the community had an equal vote to participate in the common deliberations of the group we would have democracy. The fact that everybody else outside the town was completely excluded from power would not make us undemocratic.

What would make us undemocratic would be if there were some in the town who had more of a say than others.

In Athenian democracy every citizen had a political value that was equal to every other citizen irrespective of their economic worth. A man could be financially worth 30 or 40 times more than the man that he was seated next

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to in assembly but their political worth was equivalent. Of course we who participate in democracy in Australia have a sense of agreement with that as an ideal.

The Athenians were very concerned, throughout the course of their democracy, with the need to address the problem of citizens who were politically equal in the face of extreme economic disparity. In spite of the fact that Athenian democracy and Australian democracy are two almost incommensurable forms of political belonging, the Athenians were nevertheless confronting the same sorts of crises that we are confronted with as well.

For example, how do we as a democracy deal with the fact that a multi-billionaire is able to exert more political influence than another citizen purely because of wealth? Is that situation right or just? If it is not just, how do we eliminate the greater advantages that are wielded by those who have greater wealth?

This is something rather hard to eliminate but these are the kinds of questions we are confronted by if we wish to have a democracy in reality, rather than just as an ideal. The Athenians were able to divert the hunger for prestige and influence of the most wealthy men into competitive public projects that directed vast wealth towards the common good in a manner that we can only envy from afar.

For Athenian citizens, expressing their

citizenship was a way of life. They did not merely express their citizenship politically once every two or three years at the polling booth. Yet in democratic Athens there were plenty of poor farmers who could not normally afford to leave their farms to go and participate in the common deliberations of citizens.

So the Athenians dealt with this by implementing pay for jury service and pay for holding positions of authority in the state. And when there were public assemblies to make common decisions, they compensated citizens for taking the long trips from the countryside to Athens and they put them up overnight at public expense. In other words they reinvested public surplus back into the community, into the very capacity of the citizens to participate in their own democracy.

For democracy to be real for the Athenians, equality had to be manifested in material reality. Some might read that and think: 'But hold on, equality in Australian democracy is not manifested in material reality. Inequity runs the full spectrum in this country. So does that make it undemocratic?'

That is an interesting question. ■

Billy Kennedy has a PhD in Classics and teaches Greek and Roman Myth and ancient Greek language at the University of Sydney. He resides in Braidwood with his wife Mey and three dogs, and runs a garden maintenance business, Tree and Leaf, in his spare time.