



The birth of democracy

Billy Kennedy holds the speaking staff

δῆμος (dēmos) 'the common people'
+ κράτος (kratos) 'power, rule'
= δημοκρατία (dēmokratia)
'the rule or government of the common people'

TO UNDERSTAND THE ORIGINS of democracy we need to turn our gaze to Athens and Athenian democracy. Athenian democracy was not the only or even the first Greek democracy – many other Greek cities experimented with similar systems of governance. But Athenian democracy was instituted in Athens, the biggest polis (i.e. city-state) in Greece, and it is also the one we know most about from the historical record.

Athenian democracy endured for almost 200 years. It emerged almost fully fledged in around 508 BC with the reforms of Cleisthenes. It was finally extinguished in 322 BC when the Athenians challenged Macedonian hegemony in the wake of the death of Alexander the Great but were decisively defeated and then garrisoned by Macedonian troops.

Aristotle tells us that the principal function of the Greek polis was to produce unity out of disharmony. The polis provided a range of mechanisms for bringing together citizens who were in disagreement and facilitating the resolution of their difficulties. And indeed the ultimate aim of any system of

THE ACROPOLIS, ATHENS



ALL IN FAVOUR?

[AT LEFT] THE BĒMA (SPEAKERS PLATFORM) IN THE PYNX (ASSEMBLY) AT ATHENS

WILLIAM C. MOREY, *OUTLINES OF GREEK HISTORY*, 1903

government in Greek cities in the Classical period, and this is particularly true of democracy, was to achieve harmonia among the citizens. Harmonia eventually comes to mean something like our 'harmony'. It was a term found also in musical theory and described things that were well matched or well fitted together. The aim of democracy was to bring together competing interests among the citizens and to get them all pulling together in the one direction.

What was abhorrent to a Greek citizen was stasis, a 'standing still', of political life in the city. This was equivalent to death and the same term, stasis, was used to describe civil war. The Greeks knew, as we know today when we look at what is happening in Syria or what happened in former Yugoslavia, that civil conflict can be the very most bitter of conflict, and thus it was to be avoided at all costs.

Interestingly, if we took an Athenian citizen and put him in the public gallery at Canberra today and let him watch parliament for a little while, he would probably be astonished. He would think: 'There are two sides here who seem to be at war with one another. They don't seem to be moving towards any agreement. In fact there seems to be institutionalized disagreement. How can this possibly work? How can harmony be achieved by this process?'

In Athens and the surrounding region of Attica, democracy was the solution put in place by Cleisthenes to end what had been 150-200 years of turmoil. From around the beginning or middle of the 7th century BC there was great unrest amongst the common people of Attica (the region surrounding Athens) due to ever increasing inequality of wealth and political power.

Simply put, the population was divided into two key groups – the eupatridae, 'the sons of good families' (that is to say the aristocrats or elites), and the dēmos, 'the common people'.

The eupatridae had extensive land holdings and held all the civic offices while the common people were typically rural smallholders with no direct access to political power. These smallholders were subsistence farmers who were at the mercy of the climate year to year as they tried to support their families. If there was a year of drought, or where it rained but at the wrong time, they could be left short of food. The large land holders, however, had a scale of production and storage facilities that allowed them to ride out difficult times. When in need the smallholders would go to them for help and subsequently fall into debt.

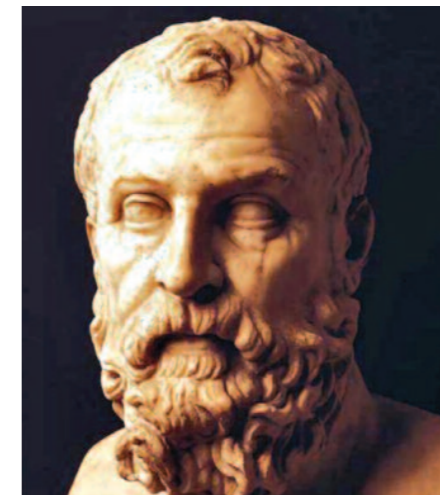
Now, 7th century BC Attica was pre-monetary, so payment for this debt first took the form of labour. The smallholder in debt would enter into what was effectively an indentured relationship with the aristocrat who had given him sustenance. He would therefore contribute a portion of his time to working the land of that aristocrat. It seems, however, that it was nigh on impossible for such subsistence farmers to ever pay off their debts, no matter how hard they worked to do so. In the end, the elite land holder would make a claim on the person of the debtor himself or one of his family. That is to say the debtor was compelled to sell himself or a member of his family into slavery in order to

clear his debts. Many of those who were not sold into debt slavery were effectively indentured workers under paternalistic aristocrats. It is not difficult to see how this situation eventually caused considerable unrest amongst the common people.

The situation became so bad by the beginning of the 6th century, around 590, that the city-state of Attica was on the brink of civil war with the ruling elites and smallholders at each other's throats, and members of the various elite families also fiercely at odds with one another. To avoid catastrophe they appointed a plenipotentiary lawgiver, Solon, and gave him complete authority to reorganise the polis however he thought best.

Solon went ahead and instituted some very important reforms. Principal among these was a redefinition of citizenship. Solon made it absolutely illegal for a citizen to be compelled to sell themselves into slavery to clear a debt, and he freed all those citizens who had been so enslaved. This momentous event was cause for huge celebration and was commemorated in classical Athens by a festival called the seisachtheia, which literally means 'the shaking off of the yoke placed on one'. Though his reforms were a huge im-

AYES TO THIS SIDE, NAYES ON THAT



SOLON 'THE LAWGIVER'
NAPLES, NATIONAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

provement, Solon did not want to become a tyrant, so he stopped short of redistributing land or addressing the monopolisation of public offices by the wealthy elites. This meant that fundamental inequalities still lingered and this situation festered and then exploded again between 580 and 570 BC.

In the midst of this commotion an elite named Peisistratos seized absolute power as a tyrant. Peisistratos acted as all good tyrants do. He made sure to exile his main rivals among the com-

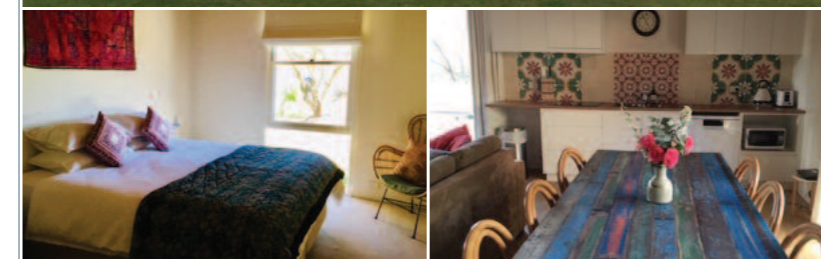
peting elite families, and he identified his own interests with those of the common people and the city itself. He set about energetically modernising Athens, including the physical city and its institutions.

He introduced a universal justice system with travelling courts to resolve citizen disputes, and he appears to have begun carefully and diplomatically redistributing the land. He instituted a festival, the Panathenaia, which celebrated Attic unity under the protection of the goddess Athena.

In short, Peisistratos created an umbrella under which nascent democratic institutions could start to blossom, and thereby a powerful civic ideology emerged, particularly amongst the rural dēmos who regarded the age of Peisistratos as a golden age of prosperity and peace. ■

[There's more to this story than will fit in one issue. The rest will follow soon.]

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.



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