New Democracies Underpinned or Undermined

The second Dame Penelope Jessel Memorial Lecture by Michael Meadowcroft to the John Stuart Mill Institute on 8th March 2001

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Introduction

It is highly appropriate that this second Penelope Jessel Memorial Lecture should be concentrating on larger issues beyond our own shores. Penelope was a thorough and instinctive internationalist who would have been exasperated by the increasing lack of confidence amongst so many politicians in their ability to participate in the European debate, and disappointed at the increasing myopia of the British electorate.

Background

Although there has been assistance to *new* democracies from the more established ones for a very long time, (for instance, The Electoral Reform Society was involved in advising on electoral systems for the Durban City Council in 1910) the burgeoning of western assistance and associated measures has taken place over just a decade. The biggest influence on this remarkable trend was the accession to power in the Soviet Union of Mikhail Gorbachev. Suddenly, with the

break-up of the Soviet empire, a host of new republics with no history of free elections came clamouring for assistance. Also, as communism ceased to be seen as a virulent threat, President de Klerk was able to unban the ANC and the South African Communist party in February 1990 and thus spark off a move towards multiparty democracy in Africa. We are also now seeing the same trend in the Middle East, and also in South East Asia, where in the June 7th 1999 election in Indonesia 105 million people voted - making it the second largest democracy in the world after India.

Curiously, despite the multiplicity of electoral assistance and monitoring missions and the billions of dollars poured into them over recent years, there has been hardly any move to evaluate the work and to draw lessons for future involvement. Such evaluation is overdue and could perhaps be an appropriate task for the Stockholm based International Institute for Democratic and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) which was set up to be, amongst other things, a repository for good electoral practice.

The only basis on which Western European and North American countries can justify their involvement in providing technical assistance and international observation to young democracies, particularly after the Florida debacle, is that the quest for democracy is universal, is never ending and is a mutual learning

process. I am strongly in favour of there being international observation of all elections, including ours, as an accepted practice.

In many contexts western assistance has underpinned democracy but in certain instances it has undermined it. Over the course of thirty-seven missions in twenty-six countries I have come to the very positive but highly subjective conclusion that *democracy*, in the sense of a wish to take part in influencing how one is governed, is instinctively part of the human personality. In my view nothing else can explain why men and women from every kind of *primitive* society are prepared to go to such great lengths to register and to vote. They deserve to be encouraged and supported in that desire. This lecture aims to pose a lot of questions and to put forward a few possible answers based on that work.

Definition

This is not the place to enter into a philosophical discussion on the nuances of the words *politics* and *democracy* but rather to define them in the accepted context of the work with new and young democracies in recent years. In that accepted sense of the word "democracy" I mean parliamentary democracy, or "representative democracy", ie the involvement of the people in the running of their society via choices expressed through the ballot box. Equally, "politics"

means the organisation of political parties, through which policies for a country are developed and by which candidates are presented at public elections.

Peaceful Change

The essence of good democracy and healthy politics is that they provide the means of achieving peaceful change. If citizens are denied the opportunity of expressing their opinion peacefully and effectively on the way they are governed they will sooner or later turn to other less peaceful means of bringing about change. There has been a healthy trend over the past decade away from totalitarian states and towards free elections.

Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the former UN Secretary-General, in the policy statement *Agenda for Peace*, made the crucial point that democratic elections are a vital component in peace-making and peace-building. Essentially this is based on the concept that warring parties could be persuaded to put the issues involved in their conflict to the people who would thus be given the opportunity at the ballot box to cast judgement on the rival claims. Thus "ballots" could take the place of "bullets".

The received truth is, therefore, that "democracy" is essential to making and keeping the peace, and that democracy requires free and fair elections. No problem

with that statement, only that elections are never fully free and fair, and that, as a consequence, democracy is invariably flawed. The key question is, therefore, what are the electoral conditions necessary to validate the results and to legitimise a democracy?

The truth on the ground, since those heady days of the late 1980s, suggests that democracy has, alas, not always proved capable of resolving disputes. The determination to grasp territory and/or control by military means, and the apparent acceptance and subsequent legitimisation - however reluctantly - of conquest, is now threatening what was otherwise an accelerating acceptance of the self-evident benefits of democracy. The situation in the Balkans, in the Transcaucasus, in Sierra Leone, in Zaïre/Congo and in Angola is a sad testimony to the vulnerability of democracy faced with a relatively small minority of determined power seekers.

There is, however, no real alternative to representative democracy that is remotely acceptable to the peace-loving and peace-desiring majority. The question, therefore, is what kind of politics and how do we entrench the best politics? Politics is sometimes referred to as being a "dirty game". In reality there is no such thing as a dirty game - only dirty players.

Free and Fair?

Everyone uses the shorthand of *free and fair* in describing electoral standards, but those involved professionally in election observation have not used it for many years. I would be surprised if you could find the phrase in written form in any *final statement* by election observers in the past seven or eight years. No election anywhere is, in the strict sense, free and fair. The inequality of resources between parties, differential access to the media, the bias of the electoral system all militate against free and fair elections. Consequently one is reduced to using careful phrases, such as *the election was an accurate reflection of the wishes of the electorate on the day*. Or, even more diplomatically, *the election represented a further step in the development of a fully functioning democracy*. Or one can say that the quality of the election can be regarded as *giving legitimacy to the results*. There is usually a predisposition to make encouraging statements about an election that the international community has accepted an invitation to observe. The European Union, for instance now has rules on viability and feasibility to determine whether an observer mission should be undertaken. An election which clearly cannot be legitimate, because, for instance, major parties are not allowed to participate, should not receive a formal international observer mission. There is, however, sometimes diplomatic or political pressure to make

more positive statements on an election than it really deserves.

The legitimacy of an election is not particularly linked with the standard of its organisation. I have known many badly organised elections the results of which I regard as being accurate and equally I have known a few very well organised elections which were certainly not. The test is whether or not the electors are successfully manipulated by the governing party. Even intimidation is not necessarily effective; in my experience electors are remarkably shrewd and very tough. In any case it is exceptionally difficult to *steal* an election on polling day and most manipulation occurs in the weeks before the poll.

The seal of approval

The final statement on the election by the team or teams of international observers is invariably eagerly awaited by the authorities and the parties. There are huge problems for those co-ordinating the teams, not only in ensuring that one receives quickly enough the opinions of observers in far flung parts, and can liaise with other co-ordinators, but also in considering the consequences of what one decides. Consider the situation if the final statement were to state bluntly that the election was not legitimate. The winners of the election are highly unlikely to agree to a re-run. The international

observers leave on the next flight leaving the losers and the electorate in an acute and dangerous dilemma. Are they to accept an unsatisfactory result or take to the streets? Is the international community going to use its muscle to try to engineer enough changes in the electoral processes in the country to assuage opposition opinion? It is a problem that faces us regularly.

There are, of course, a number of domestic monitoring groups, that is, national pro-democracy coalitions whose main raison d'être is to recruit, train and field enough independent election observers to be able to give a far more broadly based assessment of polling day and the count than international observers can possibly provide. They also often do a *quick count* by selecting scientifically a sample of polling stations which will give a sufficiently accurate picture of the national result and which, if carefully monitored, can inhibit manipulation of the election. It was through the remarkable efforts of one such organisation, NAMFREL, in the Philippines that Ferdinand Marcos was deposed and Corazon Aquino declared elected - via the quick count, which was believed, rather than the official count which was not!

There are, however, other more long-term questions over domestic monitoring. Not only is there the issue of principle over whether those with a vote at the election in question can be entirely neutral, but the deeper

question of whether by denuding the party political process of many thousands of pro-democracy enthusiasts these organisations are themselves contributing to a less effective political process. No-one doubts the courage of their members or the value of their work, but they ought not to believe that they should undertake the task for ever, as opposed to being part of the party process themselves and guaranteeing the legitimacy of the process by the mutual checking of each other by healthy competing parties.

It is also now accepted that specialist media monitoring can play a crucial role in judging the quality of an election. There are a number of highly professional colleagues, and at least two European institutes, who recruit and train local monitors on an accepted methodology which judges both the quantity and quality of the local media through the election period.

Long-term or Short-term?

Increasingly there is a realisation that early technical assistance and long-term observation are more effective than short-term involvement. If the aim is to inhibit abuse and to have an influence on the quality of the process then having sympathetic and professional teams in place some months before polling day is essential.

The need to have a continuing international presence for at least a short period after an election is not yet generally accepted. Usually, during the course of working alongside political leaders and electoral commissions for some months, one builds relationships of mutual confidence. It would not be difficult to envisage a follow-up mission being routinely part of the process in order to switch assistance from the electoral process to the legislative function. It really is foolish to wave goodbye just days after an election for a brand new parliament as if those thrust into representative democracy for the first time can acquire the difficult skills overnight to cope with the immense economic and social pressures that will be on their immediate agenda.

Political parties

The nature of political parties is fundamental to the stability of the political process and no more so than in young democracies. The key difference between a political party and any other kind of voluntary body is that a party contests elections. Any organisation that promotes candidates at an election, particularly in a co-ordinated way in a significant number of constituencies, can be regarded as a party. The electoral process requires parties of one kind or another. Even in Uganda, where politics is organised within "The Movement" and is ostensibly non-party, the political

allegiances of competing candidates are usually - and increasingly - well known. Given that the scale and complexity of modern politics, particularly on a national basis, prevent the individual from acting directly on his or her behalf, democratic elections provide a process by which the elector can choose someone to "deputise" for himself or herself in parliament. The Russians, like the French, actually use the word "Deputy" for their members of parliament.
I strongly believe that, in the longer term, no democracy can survive unless its political parties base themselves on political philosophy. All other possible determinants are either not susceptible to changing the voter's mind and electoral choice by rational argument and persuasion, or are so capricious as to undermine the possibility of stability. My experiences in many parts of the world encourage me to believe that human beings are much more alike in their basic needs and desires than is sometimes admitted. Whatever their circumstances each individual man, woman and child needs food and shelter, personal security, and health care, and seeks love and friendship, education and the benefits of their cultural heritage.

Historically the methods of achieving these basics are grouped in only a handful of political philosophies. Traditionally, dating from the arrangement of parties in the revolutionary assembly in France, these are placed on a Left-Right spectrum - ranging from the far left and

massive state control, provision and ownership, to the far right and complete free enterprise, competition and self-provision. Thus socialism is regarded as being on the left and conservatism on the right. There is, however, a different spectrum - "north-south" rather than "east-west" - which takes as its determinant the concentration of power versus the spreading of power. Those who stress this axis claim that a state monopoly and a private monopoly, ie the consequence respectively of extreme left and extreme right policies, are very similar and are equally dangerous. Whichever is thought correct is a matter for individual choice, the important thing is to seek as clearly defined and distinctive a philosophical place as possible.

Unhealthy bases for political parties.

Three common determinants for parties effectively deny the possibility of a change of allegiance based on argument and persuasion:

> [a] Region: sometimes parties base themselves on a region, usually because the area in question contains a more or less distinct group of people. In Romania for instance there are parties based on the regions in which the German and Hungarian minorities live. Each of these minorities believes that by banding together in one party it has the power to protect itself. Alas, the opposite is true.

The minority, by definition, can never be a majority and can never gain office. The possibility of political change is virtually denied. Even if an unlikely coalition of such parties were to be formed it could probably not achieve sufficient coherence to remain in office long.

[b] Tribe: In some countries the party structure reflects tribal identities. Africa particularly illustrates the dangers of tribal politics. One of the worst recent examples is probably Burundi where the Tutsis and the Hutus have had their own parties. There is no possibility of political change; the majority will always be a majority, and a minority a minority, and this has lead to the sad violence and strife we have witnessed. The Burundi situation is not an argument against democracy but rather an argument for a healthier democracy - one in which *democracy* does not legitimise tribal domination.

[c] Religion: The spectre of religious fundamentalism looms large today, not only Muslim fundamentalism, as in Algeria and elsewhere, but also Hindu fundamentalism with the BJP in India, Jewish fundamentalism in Israel, and Protestant fundamentalism in Northern Ireland. In every case the consequence is a party structure which is virtually set in stone and which attempts

to deny the possibility of rational change. Freedom to pursue religious beliefs and to promote them is a crucial human right, which must be guaranteed by a political system, but political systems can only function if they are based on reason and rationality.

Two bases for parties lead to dangerous and capricious politics:

[d] Leaders: The belief in the mystical powers of the strong leader has in history very often led to disaster. There is no unknown or hidden truth that even the most gifted leader can discover that could not be better and more healthily based within an accepted political philosophy. The idea that there could be one charismatic leader able to work miracles on his or her own is deeply flawed and often leads to authoritarian rule. The strength and value of a good leader comes from the trust and co-operation he or she has with his or her followers. If a party is based on one individual it runs the risk of becoming disillusioned when the leader cannot deliver or when the leader is eventually perceived to have the same human fallibilities as everyone else.

[e] Policies: This may seem an odd statement. Policies - the manifesto - are often regarded as a valid basis for the formation of a party.

Unfortunately, policy - as opposed to philosophy - is ephemeral. The manifesto can only be a snapshot of the party's views on that day's political agenda. Events can make policy obsolete overnight. For instance, all that had been written over many years on East-West relationships became out of date overnight with the advent of Gorbachev. Similarly manifesto pledges on policy with regard to South Africa became obsolete with De Klerk's February 1990 speech and the dismantling of apartheid. In a healthy party system policy does not appear out of thin air; it is rooted in the basic beliefs of the party promoting it.

The only purpose of parties developing policy and campaigning is to persuade the electorate to support them. If the political parties are based on other than intellectual foundations there is no point in attempting to persuade the voters. Unless parties put forward genuine reasons of principle for changing party allegiance the whole democratic apparatus is in danger of being discredited.

Democracy and its challenges

The challenges to democracy that exist in the developing world are the same challenges that face Western Europe and North America. Democracy is in grave danger in the developed world, where economic

growth has traditionally provided the means to obscure the complex and deep problems that have to be tackled. Western politicians still try and bribe their electorates with promises of increased wealth, even though there is now little prospect of being able to deliver, particularly without risking still further damage to the global environment. Western politicians and western democracy in general currently appear unable to cope with the problems of decline. There are a few signs of hope: the European Union, for all its faults, is one of them. Here for the first time in history there is a *democracy* in which MPs are elected across more than one nation state, and in which MPs sit in political rather than in national groups. Perhaps there is a lesson here for other continents, particularly for Africa with its often peculiar and arbitrary, colonially imposed, boundaries to seek the progressive diminution of national sovereignty. Pan-Africanism may well be needed for democracy to thrive in Africa. Like the European Union, Africa may well have to start with an existing regional organisation, such as ECOWAS in that unstable and conflict-torn corner of West Africa.

"Peace" in its wider connotation, which Western countries also need to perceive, requires that crucial "consent" to be governed which in theory is the purpose of the electoral process. But unless there is an awareness of the minimum required quality of elections, rather than just the quantity, disillusion with

democracy is inevitable. Certainly even a large parliamentary majority in an election where the competing parties are each based on different tribes, fighting to control a country whose artificial boundaries militate against any long-term unity, is unlikely to be able to command a lasting peace. I recall ruefully a conference in Washington DC in 1995 on democracy in Africa in which almost all the participants were members of that travelling circus of electoral specialists who tend to descend on a new democracy and offer genuine and useful assistance. We discussed in an atmosphere of mutual warmth various examples of our "battle honours" and their beneficial outcome.

Eventually the Conference reached the final paper, presented by Professor Claude Ake of Port Harcourt University, Nigeria, an academic whose support for democracy in very difficult circumstances was beyond reproach. Claude presented a devastating argument that unless elections were built on the firm foundation of civil society, and involved non-ethnically based parties, then at best elections merely legitimised a dominant tribal elite, and, at worst, were themselves the instrument of conflict. Given the audience, the silence was palpable and he concluded with a shrewd observation: "Elections, specifically free and fair elections, are the effect rather than the cause of democracy".

There is a "Gresham's Law" which relates to politics as well as to economics. Bad politics drives out good! It is much easier to devalue the political currency than it is to enhance it. Also, once devalued it is very difficult to reverse the electors' disillusion.

The Democracy Industry

Democracy today is big business. Elections are very labour intensive and, to ensure the security of the ballot, they also require sophisticated equipment and materials. For instance, some two million poll workers were needed in Indonesia, plus everything from ballot boxes to indelible ink. To deal with voter registration and the election itself will cost even a smallish country of, say, five million electors, around thirty million US dollars. Clearly such levels of expenditure are beyond the financial capacity of most of the new democracies and in recent years considerable international aid has been centred on assisting the practical details of the transition to democracy. A significant amount of the procurement has, at the moment, to be supplied from the developed world and some of the aid thus goes back to the donor countries who will be supplying the materials to carry out these practical details.

The high cost of the electoral process is an inhibiting factor to a country that may need to advance the date of its next election for legitimate purposes. It is also a

significant factor in considering whether or not to have provincial and district voting separate from parliamentary elections, as a way, for instance, of focusing attention on local issues. In addition to all the direct election costs, there is also a growing democracy industry providing technical assistance and co-ordinating observer missions. Increasingly, with substantial operating profits at stake, this has become a commercial business enterprise, fuelled by the introduction of competitive tendering by some governments and by the European Commission - probably the biggest current player on the electoral pitch.

A number of the organisations employed in this field are specialists, such as the London-based Electoral Reform Society (ERS) and its international subsidiary Electoral Reform International Services (ERIS), and the American International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) in that they do no other consultancy work. For example, ERS is the only such NGO with consultative status with the UN's ECOSOC organisation. ERIS, has not yet been expected by its parent body to produce a profit – thus enabling its more commercial competitors to complain that this gives an advantage to ERIS when tendering for work. IFES was set up in 1987, with its first reports, on Nigeria and Paraguay, appearing the following year. Its first foray into Europe came with the opening up of Hungary in

1989, an event which signalled a coming opportunity to other specialists.

There are, or course, other large consultancy and/or public relation companies in the field operating from the UK, such as The Public Affairs Company, based in the north of England, that has set up a separate company, Democracy International, to compete for work as well as professional bodies, such as the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) and the Association of Election Administrators (AEA), that also have separate commercial organisations. There is also the Westminster Foundation which now almost exclusively works through the parties represented in the House of Commons and GJW which began as a UK public relations company.

Although most of the formal organisations are based in the UK and USA, other countries are active in the field, often using their development organisations, such as SIDA in Sweden, or research bodies, such as the Eberhausen Institute in Germany. The German political foundations are also very much involved in broad *pro democracy* work in new and young democracies. Other European countries, such as France, have until recently had no effective channel for identifying and promoting specialists in electoral and related fields. There is now an NGO *ProDemocratie* formed by consultants in the field which is aiming to fill the vacuum. A large Italian

consultancy firm, Italtrend, is increasingly working in the electoral field and in Holland there is the Dutch company, Planet

Already mentioned is IDEA, one of the more recent independent bodies in this field, the Stockholm based International Institute for Democratic and Electoral Assistance that has as one of its aims to provide a forum for interaction and exchange of experiences among a variety of global actors involved in the promotion of democracy.

Although this work burgeoned following the collapse of the Soviet Union, essentially, all these companies, whatever their antecedents, are now highly commercial. The compulsory tendering process, started by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government in the UK, and followed by the European Commission, has forced the companies into competition for work. Arguably, their very different structures, particularly whether "not for profit" or completely in the private enterprise sector, ensures that the competition is far from being on an equal basis, but there is also a potential bias in that some organisations can put in lower bids as they use mainly older consultants who have a substantial salary or pension and, therefore, do not require as high a consultancy fee as those who depend on this work for a living. Nor can bids for the same contract easily be evaluated between, say, ERIS, who traditionally have

used a high proportion of consultants with a political background, and SOLACE whose main background is the local government civil service. Stories abound of square pegs in round holes. Given the nature of the work, negotiated contracts with individual organisations, based on their experience and expressed specialisms, would produce better results. Alternatively, the direct employment of individual consultants by the implementing organisation, as was done by UNDP in Indonesia, may even be easier and less expensive.

Those who now specialise in international political consultancy work, like myself, are essentially on a big global circuit and we meet up at election after election, or at the same workshops, seminars and training sessions. The regulars are certainly highly professional and very often have to rescue registration or electoral processes from impending disaster by their sheer ability to improvise. Again, the stories of such battle honours abound on the circuit. Our CVs are with many of the same companies and we are often approached for the same project by two or more different companies! Basically, all of us, companies and individuals, maintain a watchful eye on what elections are coming up in which countries, and then ascertain whether an international organisation, or a particular country, is taking on a significant role in funding aspects of the electoral process. Then, for the companies, it is a question of getting in on the act, putting together the

specialists with the relevant expertise, and bidding for a contract. To a greater or a lesser extent, the companies have had to become predatory - some much more than others. It is big business and there is considerable money at stake on the larger contracts, with companies making upwards of 15% on each consultant's remuneration, in addition to management fees.

The democracy industry has grown rapidly and haphazardly over the past decade. It plays a crucial role in underpinning the democratic process in very many countries. Without the accumulated experience and expertise of the teams of specialist consultants - probably numbering in total no more than 250 - it is unlikely that many of the young democracies would even survive, let alone get to the stage of coping without external assistance, as some are now doing. But it is high time there was some examination of the industry, its structure, the basis of tendering and competition, whether direct employment would be more effective, and so on. A appropriate task perhaps for IDEA to take on board?

Expectations

After the first flush of hope and enthusiasm the new democracies of eastern Europe and of Africa are already in trouble. Although there are immediate practical steps that can be taken to assist new

democracies, the basic problem is that expectations of democracy were always far too high. Envious eyes were all too often cast towards the western democracies and their apparently ever-rising standards of living. Over simplified, the equation ran something like this: the west has free elections and free enterprise; the west has affluence; therefore free elections and free enterprise lead to affluence. Particularly in eastern Europe, so close to its western neighbours, too many people believed that they were voting for the supermarket, and failed to see the tell tale signs of communities whose values are arguably much too skewed by economic considerations and whose neighbourhoods are being undermined by their failure to come to grips with the more enduring and real values of human society. As a consequence, when democracy failed to deliver their high hopes and expectations, democracy was blamed and disillusion set in.

In Poland the party structure is fragmented, voter turnout has been desperately low, with for many years a President, Lech Walesa, in constant strife with parliament. Former Soviet Georgia staggers from one state of emergency to another in its attempt to cope with revolt in Abkhasia. In Hungary constituencies have had to rerun elections in an attempt to reach the minimum legal turnout necessary. In Russia the Communists dominate the Duma and polled 35% against President Yeltsin in 1996, despite the abuse of state power and

media against them. The election last year of Vladimir Putin as a *strong* leader provides Russia with a further opportunity to entrench democracy.

The newly unified and democratic Yemen fell apart in a north-south civil war within months of its first genuine election in 1993, and in 1997 the main opposition party felt so discriminated against that it boycotted the elections. The artificial coalition which followed the UN run elections in Cambodia staggered from crisis to crisis until it was fatally undermined in a coup in July 1997 - though happily, the new elections a year later seem currently to have produced a stronger democratic base, with a separation of powers between executive and legislature and, most unusually, a formal opposition. The elected Palestinian National Authority appears to be unable to restrain the undemocratic excesses of President Arafat. Registration rules had to be applied differentially in Bosnia - and rigorously policed - in an attempt to prevent the elections further entrenching ethnic cleansing. Poor Sierra Leone, having struggled successfully to vote out its previous military dictatorship, then found itself overthrown by a yet another army officer, with whom the legitimate President has had to compromise. And, in what is probably the most contentious situation of all, an election in Algeria had to be called off when it became clear that the fundamentalist party was going to win -

and in the following election the main fundamentalist parties were excluded from competing.

Fortunately, none of these traumatic experiences have - as yet - seriously undermined the various regimes' commitment to democracy and to pluralistic elections. Indeed, in Romania and Serbia there have been healthy signs that the former Communist regimes elected on the back of public disillusion can be replaced through the ballot box, but unless we realise what is happening, and confront the growing belief that democracy cannot transform society, there are dangers ahead from which even we in Western Europe will not be able insulate ourselves. A commitment only to the electoral process is not enough. At very least elections buy time, but the time thus bought is not being properly used. Quite apart from the moral case for assisting those struggling to survive, an unstable, nationalistic and fragmented former Soviet Union could make Bosnia look like a side show, and would have serious implications for us all.

Among the practical and urgent necessities of new democracies are sympathetic assistance with the development of parliamentary processes and with the infrastructure of an open, democratic, civil, society. Where the transformation also requires economic changes, this too needs to be underpinned from outside. Such support is not only altruistic but is also

enlightened self interest; it is not in the interests of western society to have widespread instability and insecurity in whole regions of the world.

It follows also from the problems of sustaining democracy that politicians need to avoid bribing the electorate with policy promises that cannot be delivered. Here again this points to the need for parties to emphasise their view of society rather than to place too much stress on expensive specifics.

Manipulation through state resources and the media

Two particular ways and means used to undermine the legitimacy of elections are, first, the manipulation of the state's power to assist the government's electoral prospects, and, second, the dominance of the media - particularly the electronic media. In a number of elections in new democracies the Dusseldorf-based European Institute for the Media has done a highly professional job of monitoring the media output, both in quality and quantity, and has issued a number of powerful indictments of the abuses practised. Control of television channels is particularly crucial, particularly during the campaign period, not only to ensure that allocated party broadcasts are transmitted on a fair rota, but also to attempt to determine and impose balance on news, commentary and discussion

programmes. So much is subjective that it is impossible to succeed completely, but the attempt must be made. Other "ordinary" programming allegedly has an effect. I recall in the Russian Presidential election in 1996 receiving complaints from Zyuganov supporters that on the eve of poll and on polling day the pro-Yeltsin television channels were filling up their schedules with feature films showing the worst excesses of Stalin's regime!

There is a case for the electoral law to provide for an independent Electoral Commission actually to assume control over all television output for, say, two hours each evening of the campaign period. In some countries each party has its own television channel - and the technology to enable this to be affordable is now available. In other countries, including the UK, no paid political advertising is permitted at any time, but "major" parties are allocated free time both in and out of election periods. In Malaëi the UN Electoral Assistance Mission found the money to "sponsor" election broadcasting on radio - there being no domestic television. In Cambodia in 1992, Radio UNTAC provided the only objective domestic news output. Personally, I believe that in virtually every country, and particularly in new democracies, television and sometimes radio is so pervasive and so influential that the need to regulate its output, at least during the election campaign period, must to be accepted. Without

regulation the aim of free and fair elections is even more of a chimera.

Tackling the problems

Politicians are always in danger in creating an aura of elitism around themselves, often almost suggesting that their work is not for ordinary mortals. The problems facing every man and woman in each country are essentially very straightforward. The need for food, shelter and for health care; the desire for education and, above all, for a sense of security and contentment. It is, however, also true that the achievement of these aims is desperately complex. In addition the wider problems of the world are also incapable of simplistic answers. It behoves all politicians, however, to speak as simply and as straightforwardly as possible and to avoid deliberately over-complicating issues. The electorate deserves to be told the truth as plainly as possible and the politician who acts on the need to be accountable to his or her voters is much more likely to be trusted than the modern snake oil salesman who seeks to give bland assurances or, even worse, avoids meeting the public.

Five interlocking components are required for a healthy democracy and for politics to succeed:

Intellectual rigour: It is vital in the world of today, with its complexities and its competing

interests, to approach political problems with real intellectual rigour. The world is full of charlatans with simplistic answers to baffling problems. For those who seek the high calling of politics there is no substitute - alas - to reading as widely as possible, to debating and discussing with as many experts as are available, and to working out with one's colleagues the best means of improving the social, political and economic conditions of the people;

A mission to explain: It is important to use every means possible to take the public into one's confidence, not only via the media but also including the face to face encounter with ordinary people at public meetings. The oral tradition has largely disappeared in western politics, and with it has gone the exposition of a case, followed by cross-examination under questioning from the floor. The electorate must not be under-rated. Even the most unsophisticated of rural people have a real sense of justice and an instinctive and practical awareness of their individual and communal needs.

A desire to involve: Politics and democracy work best when there is a genuine and expressed desire on the part of the parties to involve the public in their activities. If parties seem to be elitist and are organised from the centre downwards then

members of the public are inhibited from joining and participating. Internal party democracy is important to a healthy political system:

- the need to have local party officials who recruit members and who hold local meetings,
- the need to have a method of electing officials at all levels.
- the need to have a democratic process for determining the party's policy.

These are all important aspects of a political process that regards the public as partners in democracy rather than as lobby fodder or as a nuisance to the party leadership.

Neutral public authorities: The transfer of power, and the principle of the potential of democratic alternance, mean nothing if not accompanied by the transfer of support to the elected regime by neutral public authorities, in particular the security forces and the civil service.

Appropriate levels of authority: In one form or another there needs to be *federalism*, with an identifiable, accountable and acceptable level of authority for the delivery of each service - preferably based on the principle of *subsidiarity*. In the modern world, with rampant globalisation, many artificial national boundaries, and an

immense environmental challenge, this has to involve a supranational dimension.

None of these things will be achieved without hard work and even sacrifice on the part of those who dedicate themselves to the political life. But, however tough politics is, all other ways of organising society are worse! There is a deeply rooted instinctive wish on the part of all peoples to participate in their own governance. Individuals may not know why they wish to take part; they rarely know how to do so, but it is up to politicians to liberate those feelings and to make sure that there is the most involved and best informed electorate possible.

Politics as art not science

In academic institutions politics is often taught as "Political Science". I believe this to be a misnomer. Politics is much more of an art than a science. It is part of the art of living. Being able to govern oneself peacefully and progressively and, in particular, being able to achieve the transfer of power through the democratic process, is a sign that a country is truly civilised. There is, however, one key distinctive feature compared to other arts. The "ordinary" artist works with the paint or the clay to produce the finished product and the materials he or she works with are less important

than the final artefact. But the political artist is working with people and they are more important than the final product. In other words, the end does not justify the means. Indeed the means will influence the ends and may even mean that one's policy aims have to be revised to avoid using means which harm individuals.

The best example is probably that of the search for equality. Equality of esteem and of opportunity do not cause too many problems, but the attempt to achieve equality of distribution, whilst in theory a perfectly legitimate and even laudable aim, has invariably been the excuse for the most vicious confiscatory policies, requiring an autocratic and repressive regime. Even then it is unsuccessful as the consequence of such a policy is the destruction of the economic base itself.

International aid for democracy

In the light of the experience of the '90s, five extensions of western governments' policy are needed. These are set out here in the context of young democracies generally, rather than for any particular country.

Economic stability

First, even though the new economic aspirations of the post-totalitarian era are impossible to fulfil, a stable currency is a key component of political stability. Historically I know of no country that has

successfully achieved the transition to democracy without outside assistance to underpin its currency. We recently celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Marshall Plan which put, at today's prices, more than 150 billion dollars into a war-ravaged Europe. Where today is the George Marshall with a vision - and a plan - for Eastern Europe? The nearest parallel is the financier George Soros and his "Open Society" trust. The European Commission needs to underpin the rouble just as West Germany paid - and is paying - the price for the integration of East Germany. International financial commitment is urgently needed to deal with the debilitating dangers of rampant inflation. It would be cheaper in the long run than picking up the pieces if democracy fails.

Civil Society

Second, there needs to be an awareness of the importance of civil society. The component of democracy that we from established democracies particularly tend to take for granted is the wide variety of civil society, which my former UK Liberal parliamentary colleague Richard Wainwright calls, in a metaphor taken from weaving, the "warp and the weft", and which enables us to have - some - influence over the local school, the council estate, the community health services and the workplace.

In western society the establishment of voluntary organisations, pressure groups, and community bodies is normal practice, rarely warranting comment, but in most new democracies it was previously unknown and is still revolutionary. I vote in an election most weeks - for my trade union officers, the housing association, the school board, the Liberal Party, etc, and without a developing civil society, in which such democracy becomes part and parcel of everyday life, occasional public elections are unlikely to be much more than a democratic veneer giving the semblance without the substance. This appeared to be recognised recently by US Senator John McCain, who said, in relation to the current situation in Cambodia, "The lesson is that it's more than an election that makes a democracy."

Political Party development

Third, there needs to be greater attention to the development of political parties. As set out above, without a basis in philosophy, rather than on tribes or in religion, or even on charismatic leaders, there is no long-term future. Only in Namibia has a liberation movement won two elections in a row - and even there the governing party's main electoral base depends on the majority Ovambo tribe. As Neal Ascherson pointed out in the UK broadsheet newspaper *Independent on Sunday*, the idealists

who led the revolutions have been swept away. South Africa, having coming later to the electoral scene, is still just about imbued with hope, but the ANC had started to look at its future structure and basis rather than holding the complacent assumption that it could rule for ever. Alas, the ANC was unable to act on its foresight within the constraints of the timetable for the second free election. A liberation movement is not a political party as such and when liberation is achieved, the wide coalition that such a movement requires for success makes the task of consistent and coherent government impossible in the longer term, as even the Congress Party of India finally discovered.

Post-Election

Fourth, assistance to the transition needs to extend to the newly-elected legislature. It is crazy to say on polling day, "goodbye - you're democratic now", when most, if not all of those elected have never previously sat in any elected body. No wonder it all too often falls apart.

Constitutional Review

Fifth, constitutional and electoral systems need to be reassessed. A strong presidential system, underpinned by unrepresentative election results, gives too little influence to the opposition and tempts those out of power to undermine a fragile

democracy by force. There needs to be a legitimate role for all those committed to the electoral process, whether or not in power. In particular the concept of loyal opposition is vital and is, as yet, hardly known. An electoral system that combines proportionality and accountability is needed to enhance even the best constitution.

The global opportunity

Acceptance of these components of democracy will ensure that elections become a key aspect of the process and underpin their rôle as the means of resolving conflict peacefully. The question of principle for the donor community is how far it uses its aid to force democratic change. The issue of "conditionality" is always difficult for governments worried about neo-colonialism. I have fewer and fewer qualms. A country which misuses aid to benefit the ruling clique and its followers, rather than those in need, for whom the aid was intended, is not entitled to remain immune from pressure for change from those paying the bills.

The potential to create a new democratic and progressive country lies within the grasp of the political forces that step into the electoral limelight. Winning an election may well be the greatest satisfaction and achievement but, without those who campaign and lose, democracy would not be a reality. Many years ago,

when I was first contesting municipal elections in my own city, a much more experienced politician said to me "If you can't afford to lose, you can't afford to win". That advice I pass on to all those involved in all elections, and particularly in new democracies! Participating in the electoral process is itself a vital contribution to democracy. Whether or not a particular political party does well or badly - or whether it even survives these elections - is not necessarily the only thing that matters. The party structure may well change before the next election in the light of the pressures of events and the demands placed upon it, but those who take part in genuinely multi-party elections are participating in history and are contributing to the emergence of genuine democracy.

New democracies may be fragile creatures but they are also dynamic. There may well be a honeymoon period after the election of a new President and the inauguration of a new Parliament. The electors will always watch intently to see whether they have elected men and women of stature. How those charged with the awesome task of preparing their country for the twenty first century fulfil their mandate remains to be seen but one thing is very certain, after the introduction of democracy things will never be the same again. In young democracies, as everywhere else, politics is far too important to leave to politicians! It is up to every

citizen in a democracy to be aware and alert to opportunities and challenges.

Simply to carry on offering the same assistance to young democracies without taking in the wider picture, may well hone the electoral machine towards perfection, but will carry the risk of making it a separate, purely technical process. Underpinning democracy requires more sophisticated and sensitive involvement. Those rightly determined to be involved in this second decade of assistance need to grasp the opportunity.

The views expressed in this paper are personal and do not necessarily represent any organisation which has had responsibility for missions described in the text.

Michael Meadowcroft has been active in public life in Britain for over forty years. He was a City Councillor for fifteen years, a County Councillor for six years, and was Liberal MP for Leeds West from 1983-87. He has held a number of national offices in the Liberal Party of which he is currently President. He has also written numerous books and pamphlets. He was the chief officer of a large UK voluntary organisation and was also on the staff of a major UK foundation. He Chaired the UK Electoral Reform Society from 1989-1993 and

inaugurated its international arm, under whose auspices he led many delegations to assist new democracies in Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia. Among his thirty-seven missions in twenty-six countries, he was the Co-ordinator of the United Nations Electoral Assistance Secretariat in Malawi in 1994, and was Co-Director of the European Union's Technical Assistance Mission in Cambodia in 1998. He was the Post-Election Advisor to the UNDP Technical Assistance Mission for the 1999 Indonesian elections and has led a number of international observer missions.

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