



Merry Christmas



USA



THANK YOU TOUR 2016

THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY

Trump's Victory and the Brexit Vote in 2016 Highlight
the Crisis of Democracy and the Need for Reform

By Stein Ringen

Brexit. Trump. In Britain, the country's membership in the European Union is rejected in a referendum. In America, a maverick anti-establishment political outsider wins the presidency.

These results are monumental political upheavals in the two countries, with consequences that reach beyond their shores and throughout the world. Toward the end of 2016, the French president announced that he would not be seeking a second term, citing the pressure of extremist forces, and the Italian government was dispatched in a "populist" referendum. In Austria, the extreme anti-establishment attempt at the presidency failed, but the establishment candidates had already been dismissed before the final test. History will see 2016 as a watershed, the year of reaction.

Britain and America are the world's core democracies. These countries have been bearers of a political-economic venture that has come to define the meaning of modern democracy. In 2016, to the surprise of winners and losers alike, the modern idea of modernity—"the liberal inheritance" that the philosopher John Gray described as the belief that the future is liberal and the arc of history, in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., "bends towards justice"—has suffered a defeat from which it may not soon recover. What was lost in these tests was finally a set of ideas.

To be clear, firstly: The results in both countries were eminently democratic. In Britain, it was the verdict of a referendum mandated by Parliament. In America, it was the outcome of the regular vote. In both countries, no voters could be in doubt that they were given radically different options to choose between. In both countries, the choice was between establishment and anti-establishment positions, with huge constituencies of angry voters rallying behind the policies and candidates of discontent.

◁ Donald Trump speaks in Ladd-Peebles Stadium during "Thank You" tour, Mobile, Dec. 17, 2016. *Dan Anderson/ZUMA Wire*

As often in democracies, the results were messy. The winning margins were tight, with about the same electoral strength behind losers and winners. In Britain, there is (probably) a majority in the population in favor of continued membership in the European Union (EU), but because of low voter participation among the young, that majority did not prevail in the referendum. In America, the losing candidate won the majority of the popular vote, but not in enough states to carry the election as constitutionally required. In both countries, the campaigns were distressingly ugly, the blame for which has to be shared between the perpetrators of ugliness and those unable to lift the battles above it.

But to be clear, secondly: The purpose of democracy is not to be democratic. Democracy is a method. The purpose is a social order of equality in which all citizens enjoy security and inclusion, and adequate governance to maintain and improve that order—in the American constitution: “to form a more perfect Union.” We subscribe to democracy because we believe that such a system, being under popular control, is likely to protect citizens against oppression and, being governance by consent, is likely to be effective in delivery. There has been a vision of liberty, inclusiveness, tolerance, and internationalism, and of trust in the democratic method for the advancement of these ideas. The tenability of this vision is now in question.

What is distressing in both Brexit and the Donald Trump victory is not that complacent establishments were rejected—nothing could be more pleasing to the democratic mind—but that it was done on terms that negate both the ideas of purpose that underpin the democratic enterprise and the huge advances that have been made in safeguarding democratic values after the defeat of fascism in the world, the fall of communism in Europe, and the end of legal racial and other segregation. In both countries, ugly campaigns embraced and encouraged sundry voices of xenophobia, fear of the other, racism, and divisiveness which we until the fateful year of 2016 had thought had been marginalized to the dark and dusty corners of the house of modernity. In both countries, the unexpected victories of reaction were followed by a new assertiveness of hate-speak and hate-crime.

There are lessons to be learned for those of us who are concerned for the standing of democracy in the world. We have for some time been used to thinking that “the crisis of democracy” is located in the democratic fringes where democracy has struggled to take hold and cope, such as in Russia and North Africa. There are clearly cases of democratic failure, but by and large democracy is doing well in the world. The proposition that democracy as such is in crisis has been tested empirically and rejected, for example by the German political scientist Wolfgang Merkel. Democratic weakness, it is now clear to see, is not confined to the fringe. We therefore need to give renewed and critical attention to the core democracies and how they are performing. If democracy falters in Europe and America, it falters generally. Democracy theorists have also been used to thinking—usually with reference to their rightly admired Tocqueville—that

democracy is something it is difficult to become but easier to be. Another lesson of 2016 is that democracy, even in the old democracies, remains something that is persistently difficult to be. To understand the democratic predicament, the “crisis” if you will, we should pay renewed and critical attention to the social conditions of democracy.

Failure of Leadership

What happened in Britain and America? Briefly, the establishment projects were rejected. In Britain, the government side and in America the Democratic Party represented the alternatives of continuity. It turned out they were hapless, but they were right. They were on the side of progress but were unable to stand up to the challenge of reaction. They had the wind of history behind them but were defeated by assaults of anti-politics. What came under attack was not just this or that candidate or party but the very venture of modernity as it has come to be understood in the age of liberty.

However, thus describing what happened, even in stark terms, is not to explain it. Why establishments that had history and the logic of progress on their side were overthrown by foes that were all but impressive and attractive, if not atrocious, is something that evades easy explanation.

In both cases, what the establishment sides brought to the party failed to inspire. In Britain, the government and its many allies fought for a continuation of EU membership, but never articulated any vision or idea to give life to their line. With stunning strategic incompetence, they fell back on patronizing scaremongering, which could not fail to alienate voters they needed to attract. In America, Hillary Clinton failed, from the primaries and on, to present herself as an attractive candidate with a program of purpose. With equal strategic incompetence, her campaign took swaths of voters, whose votes they just felt entitled to, for granted.

Already at this elementary level of explanation, we meet a factor that is recurrent from whatever angle we look at it: the failure of leadership. In Britain, Prime Minister David Cameron’s Conservative government failed to present its case as believable. In America, Clinton and the other Democratic leaders failed to present themselves as worthy of taking over the mantle. These tests were lost more than they were won. The sides that should have won failed to rise to the occasion and were given short shrift.

In my book *Nation of Devils: Democratic Leadership and the Problem of Obedience*, I argue that democratic order depends strongly on good leaders who are able to exercise good and persuasive leadership. In both the British and American campaigns there was an absence of good and an abundance of bad leadership. That goes to both sides. Not only did the establishment sides fail to make their case, the challenger sides disdained the responsibility of leadership. One would have hoped, in mature democracies, that those who aspire to leadership accept that with ambition comes

responsibility. That includes to behave with civility, to argue honestly, to respect the truth, to refrain from extreme demagoguery, to not stimulate base motives. The reason they should accept such responsibility is that if they do not, short-term opportunism strikes back in the form of long-term damage to respect for public service and governance and to rational deliberation and decision-making.

In these two cases, that responsibility failed utterly. It failed in particular (but not only) on the side of the challengers. In the Brexit campaign, the “leave” side built their challenge around known untruths about the economic costs of membership in the European Union. In America, the Trump campaign was simply a parade of untruths, as uncovered by fact-checkers among campaign observers. That was in both cases shocking, but equally shocking was that the establishment sides proved themselves to be without the authority to discredit utterly disreputable politicking. In both countries, the campaigns exposed weaknesses of political culture and a debilitating absence of cohesion between leaders and people which have rendered their respective systems dysfunctional.

The result of leadership failure was that the establishment sides were unable to mobilize their voters. In Britain, the young, who are overwhelmingly in favor of EU membership and who are the beneficiaries of the lifestyles of internationalism that come with European integration and therefore had much at stake in the referendum, were not mobilized. In America, the Democrats failed to mobilize not only the young but also women and minority voters, again groups that had much at stake in the election and in the defeat of the challenger. Astonishingly, those whose interests the government in Britain and the Democrats in America were promoting failed to rally behind those they should have seen as their champions. The campaigns did spiral down into distortion, but something so counterintuitive as these results cannot be explained by campaign tactics alone. We need to dig deeper.

The 2016 clashes of progress and reaction took place in an environment of post-economic crisis and extremes of inequality and rising inequality. In 2008, America and Britain, and gradually the rest of the world, plunged into an economic crash of a ferocity comparable only to that of 1929.

The fallout was, firstly, a collapse in standards of living. Many workers and families experienced the loss of jobs, the loss of savings, the loss of homes, and degradation in other ways. In Britain, real wages and working age incomes have been stagnant since the crash, and for some groups of workers in decline, and are not expected to reach pre-crash levels again until at least 2021. Poverty rates have soared. It is not that people have *felt* abandoned, it is that they *were* abandoned. It was not that their anger was the result of simple-mindedness or lack of sophistication, or that those who were rising up in revolt were, in Hillary Clinton’s words, “a basket of deplorables.” They

may not all have been articulate (by educated middle-class standards) but they were angry because they had good reasons to be angry.

Secondly, the economic crisis followed through not only to deprivation but also to a loss of confidence in prevailing models and custodianship of the political economy. During the pre-2008 years of steady economic growth, mainstream economic thinking had been infested by hubris to such a degree that ministers of finance, central bankers, and high-visibility economists were promising a steady march of growth into the heavens of prosperity. As late as June 2007, as world capitalism was about to implode, the British chancellor of the exchequer, Gordon Brown, in the formal setting of his annual Mansion House speech, heaped praise on the financial industry and congratulated “the City of London on these remarkable achievements, and on an era that history will record as the beginning of a new golden age in which a new world order was created.” Then came the crash. A year later, testifying before the House of Representatives Oversight Committee, the former U.S. Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan described himself as in “shock” at having to face up to his free-market ideology, which he had been going by for forty years or more—“the model that I perceived is a critical functioning structure that defines how the world works”—being “flawed.” In the upheavals and the reaction to them, confidence in “the experts” died. This was to haunt the Brexit campaign in Britain. Near to unanimous warnings from official and independent economists that Brexit would come at a cost to the wallet had no traction, while the dismissal of these warnings for coming from “the experts” found an easy audience.

Long before the sudden economic crash, advanced economies, the American and British ones in particular, had entered into a period of ever-widening inequalities in income and wealth. In Britain, the turning point was around 1975, when a previous trend toward less inequality was broken for a new trend of rising inequality. In America, the share of pre-tax national income to the bottom half of earners had fallen to 12 percent in 2014, from 20 percent in 1980. Of children born in 1940, almost all would obtain a higher standard of living than their parents. Of children born in 1980, only a half can count on achieving that betterment.

Gradually, inequalities grew obscene, with most of the fruits of economic growth falling to a minority of the rich and super-rich, and with the majority of the population enjoying only moderate, if any, improvement in wages and real standards of living, except such improvements as were secured by more work through longer hours and two family incomes. (This has all been documented in great detail by, in particular, Thomas Piketty in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.)

Nevertheless, as long as there was steady economic growth, inequalities were in some way tolerable since there was, or seemed to be, at least some improvement, and a great deal of hope, also for many. The economic crisis caused that to change in two

ways. The excesses of ever-widening inequality became intolerable when those in the lower- and middle-income ranks fell from comfort into neglect and deprivation. And the political response to economic crisis deepened inequality, and the perception of inequality, even further. Post-recession policies sheltered significant sections of the economy and population from the fallout of crisis, while others were left to suffer. Suddenly, societies that had been seen to be reasonably harmonious, or at least on a good path toward harmony, were exposed as deeply divided. The non-sheltered have-nots naturally resented the sheltered haves, but also found scapegoats elsewhere, such as among immigrants, or those who are different or seen as less British or less American, or more abstractly in “globalization.” Opportunistic leaders, rather than accepting leadership responsibility, stimulated and exploited the politics of scapegoating. Out of this again grew a tangible anger so that when the tests of 2016 presented themselves, the time had come for reckoning—with the rich, the toffs, the experts, the immigrants, with globalization, and in Britain with “Europe.”

I was, no doubt, not alone in asking myself, in the days after the Brexit verdict in Britain and the Trump victory in America, “How could they be so stupid?” But now, in the cold light of analysis, what I see is not stupidity but reason. The establishments lost because they deserved to lose. They deserved to lose because they had lost confidence. They had lost confidence because they had presided over an enterprise in which values promised cohesion, but realities produced division. Democracy had done a job. “In a democracy,” once explained the great Max Weber, “the people choose leaders in whom they trust. Then the chosen leaders say, ‘Now shut up and obey.’ Later the people can sit in judgement. If the leaders have made mistakes, to the gallows with them.”

However, consigning the rascals to oblivion, although important, is not all we expect of democracy. In this case, it worked out perversely so that the baby was thrown out with the bathwater. The backlash hit not only failed leaders of the day but also the long-term venture to form a more perfect union.

“Fix Our Politics”

In the late part of the twentieth century, the world experienced an explosive spread of democracy. By century’s end, 140 of 189 countries had systems of multiparty elections (as counted in the 2002 United Nations Human Development Report). In the twenty-first century, the advance of democracy has now come to a halt and there have been setbacks. If that is a sign of democratic weakness, I believe the source of weakness lies more in the democratic core than in the fringe. Democracy as such does not fall into disrepute by not being embraced in, say, Saudi Arabia, or for stumbling in, say, Russia.

But if democracy does not perform reasonably up to expectations where it is long established, it is democracy itself that is in decline. That is now unfolding. Within the

democracies, there is a lessening of popular trust in democratic rule while confidence in “stronger” and more autocratic forms of rule is rising. (These trends are now visible in European and World Values Survey data.) Internationally, soft power shifts to the dictators and dictatorships. After the American elections, for example, the leaders of China rushed into the vacuum to lecture the world that this is what you get when you are careless enough to let the people choose their leaders. At the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Lima, Peru in late November 2016, Xi Jinping was the one to reassure anxious nations that they could trust China to be their guarantor of economic openness and stability.

What is to be done? We must pray that political and economic elites in Europe and America take the rejection by their peoples—for that and no less is what it is—as a warning that the future cannot be business as usual, that they must shake themselves out of complacency, and that they need to bring themselves into a mindset of reform.

We need systemic economic reform. Societies that define themselves by security and inclusion cannot live by deprivation and division. Globalization and automation, the targets of the politics of discontent, come with enormous benefits in the form of affluence and quality of work and life. But we have not found a way of combining this progress with inclusiveness. To underwrite democracy under advanced capitalism, we need a new social contract. Post-economic crisis governments in Britain sold hardship and public finance austerity with a story that “we are all in the same boat.” We never were, but that’s where we now need to get. The shallow individualism and small-government gospel of Reaganism and Thatcherism has shipwrecked. Before inclusiveness in public policy must come inclusiveness in mindsets. It is a matter of nothing less than a reinvention of a democratic political culture. As always, it will depend on leadership.

In Europe, the mindset of reform needs to include the European Union. The project of European integration has received a potentially mortal blow. Britain exiting and the rest of the European Union continuing as before is a strategy of high risk and low imagination. British and European leaders should swallow their pride and sit down to devise a reformed union that can embrace all of Europe. The European Union is already a structure with many different forms of adhesion, from Swiss and Norwegian types of quasi-membership, via various combinations of inside and outside of the Schengen and the euro, to the comprehensive arrangements of the full-membership countries. Flexibility has proved to work and is now needed in respect to Britain and to preempt other possible exits. Brussels may have to sacrifice a battle to win the war, but better that than to lose the war.

In Britain, the time has come for constitutional reform. It is a misunderstanding that Britain does not have a written constitution just because constitutional provisions are not collected into a single document with “constitution” its heading. But

the constitution is poorly protected and open to political manipulation. The Brexit referendum was called by Prime Minister Cameron ahead of the 2015 general election for opportunistic party-political reasons. The necessary legislation breezed through Parliament without serious reflection or debate. Whatever the outcome, the referendum would have represented notable constitutional change, at the very least to have made referenda a normal instrument of political decision-making. If they can, politicians of the day will manipulate the constitution for their own advantage. That should not be possible. Constitutional provisions should be changeable, but changing the constitution is a serious business that should not be done without serious work and deliberation. By coincidence, the week after the vote, the Chilcot report of the inquiry into Britain's participation in the 2003 invasion of Iraq and its aftermath was published, with deep criticism of a dysfunctional system of decision-making which resulted in colossal mistakes both on the entry into war and post-war management. Britain does not have a safe system of political decision-making.

In America, what burst through the surface in 2016 was the pent-up pressure from a long, relentless, step-by-step erosion of political culture in which big business has fortified itself as the power behind the throne. Already President Dwight D. Eisenhower saw this coming and warned, in his farewell address in 1961, against "the military-industrial complex," the influence of which, he said, was "economic, political, even spiritual" and "felt in every city, every statehouse, every office of the federal government." He was not heeded and the build-up of corporate backstage power has continued to now constitute a more general politico-corporate complex.

The rejection of the establishment in 2016 was in part a reaction against corruption and gridlock in Washington. The reason there is gridlock is that the holders of office, in Congress in particular, are not free to make policies for the public good. Since Eisenhower's warning, corporate America has added organizational power to its already formidable arsenal of economic power. Through a vast network of partisan Political Action Committees, think tanks, media organizations, and lobbying groups, it has won control over the setting of political agendas. Furthermore, in the age of mega-expensive politics, candidates depend on sponsors to fund permanent campaigns. When big money is allowed to transgress into politics, those who control it gain power to decide who the successful candidates will be—those they wish to fund—and what they can decide once in office—that which is acceptable to those who hold the purse-strings. The representatives, or most of them, may not be personally corrupt, but the system in which they work is one of deep collusion between big politics and big money (the collusion, incidentally, of which Hillary Clinton was seen as the embodiment).

In his final State of the Union Address in early 2016, Barack Obama called on his fellow Americans to "fix our politics" to prevent "democracy from grinding to

a halt.” This, he said, is “the most important thing I want to say tonight.” That was a shocking message from the president of the United States of America, speaking in Congress, to the nation. And in hindsight now, a message loaded with foreboding. He was repeating Eisenhower’s warning, but with the radicalism of substance disguised by the elegance of rhetoric.

Washington is dysfunctional, said the president, because elected representatives are “trapped” by “imperatives” which they dislike but cannot get out of, notably that of raising money—“dark money” he had called it in his State of the Union address a year earlier. When Washington is unable to act, the next bastion to fall is trust. “A better politics doesn’t mean we have to agree on everything, but it does require basic bonds of trust between its citizens.” The reason trust breaks down is that “those with money and power gain greater control over the decisions, and then, as frustration grows, there will be voices urging us to fall back into our respective tribes. Democracy breaks down when the average person feels their voice doesn’t matter; that the system is rigged in favor of the rich or the powerful or some special interest. Too many Americans feel that way right now.” And further, since the representatives in Washington are trapped, “it’s not enough just to change a congressman or change a senator or even change a president. We have to change the system. We have to reduce the influence of money in our politics, so that a handful of families or hidden interests can’t bankroll our elections.”

It ought to be possible for Congress to extricate itself from the trap it has fallen into. The members of Congress hate it: the never-ending campaigning, the constant raising of money, the kowtowing to richness, the looking over their shoulders to the moneymen when they vote. And the people despise it. Democracy is a public good, it should be paid for publicly. It does not need mega-expensive campaigning. It is a misunderstanding that politicians chase money; it is money that chases politicians.

Reform Matters

Democracy in the world needs protection, good examples, and leadership. That must come from the core democracies, notably America and Britain. That they are able to reform matters for democracy in these countries. But it matters equally for the peoples of countries and areas that are dictatorial or where democracy is in its infancy. For my own part, I have recently been preoccupied with the political system of China. I have found it (as reported in my book *The Perfect Dictatorship*) to be a sophisticated totalitarian state. I have also seen that in the shadows of that mighty state, heroic activists risk life and livelihoods in a struggle for rule of law, freedom, and security. As a result of events in America and Europe, and through no fault of their own, their cause, and that of their fellows in other areas of oppression, has suffered a heavy setback.