



Humanistically Speaking

April 2021



A Humanist hotline to a secular worldview

Democracy in Peril

Our special edition on
Humanism and democracy

Humanism and democracy are natural allies but since the time of Plato there has been a fear that democracy will lead to the 'tyranny of the majority' and rule by the 'ignorant mob'. This month, *Humanistically Speaking* covers a wide range of topics related to our theme: monarchy, equality, protest, young people and politics. Plus our special guest Professor AC Grayling. *Step inside!*

Features this month:

- A C Grayling Interview
- Young people and politics
 - Equity vs Equality
- The dark world of lobbying
 - Proto-democracy
- Protest during lockdown
 - The Monarchy
- Plus our regular columns

Humanistically Speaking



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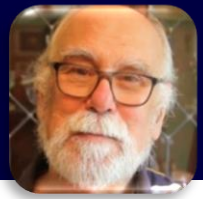
Humanistically Speaking

A Humanist hotline to a secular worldview

In this Issue

Come in, sit down, put your feet up...

David Brittain
Executive Editor



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CONTENT DISCLAIMER

Our editorial team consists entirely of humanist volunteers. Articles are written by them, or by our readers and contributors, and published at the discretion of the editorial team. We strive to publish content in line with humanist aims and values but views expressed by writers are their own and not necessarily shared by the South Central England Humanists Network or Humanists UK.

It is ironic that even after the huge social upheavals that have taken place on the long road towards democracy over the past 200 years, the same privileged wealthy class still seem to be in charge. Events throughout history have taught us that putting democracy into practice is so subtle and complex, that not even Humanistically Speaking can address every aspect in a single issue. But it is looking increasingly likely that we may have to strip it all down and start again.

Ideas about what a working democracy is, are many and varied, and even the views of the editors differ – so we would really like to know what you think? Whether there is scope to improve our British version? ... and is there anywhere in the world where you think there exists an improved working example of a democracy?

We look forward to reading your views with anticipation ...

Professor A C Grayling challenges the idea that we enjoy true democracy, and questions whether we even *have* a democracy. Amelie and Maggie offer two more fascinating perspectives on this subject whilst Ronnie addresses apparent apathy amongst the young. Aaron explores the response by the Metropolitan police in dealing with the Sarah Everard vigil, whilst David Warden discusses the monarchy, and makes some interesting observations about a character called Capel Lofft (I'd never heard of him either) and later on he makes some sometimes challenging comments about my interview with Professor Grayling and his latest book.

But with all this, if the current first past the post system works so well, and to the advantage of (what is in fact) a minority, they are hardly likely to agree to change a system that keeps them there. And if the current system works contrary to the interests of the rest of us, how are we going to put a new order in place through the very system we want to discard? The questions are easy. The answers are much, much more difficult.

David Brittain



 Humanist
Climate Action

Humanist Climate Action launched

Humanists UK members and supporters have come together to announce Humanist Climate Action – a new volunteer-led network that will ensure that the non-religious have a voice in major environmental debates. It will campaign for environmentally-friendly policies and encourage humanists everywhere to adopt greener lifestyles, following the best available scientific evidence. As its first action, Humanist Climate Action is encouraging humanists to plant trees and share a video or photo by **Earth Day on 22 April**. This will be followed by a formal launch event in May.

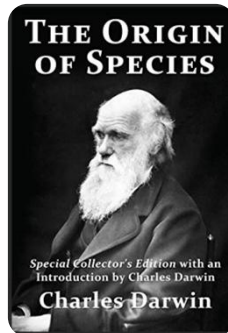


Emeritus Professor of Moral Philosophy **Richard Norman** is a founder member of Humanist Climate Action. Click on the image to read Richard's article 'Why Humanist Climate Action?'

Darwin's *Origin of Species* overtakes Bible for No. 1 slot

Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, first published in 1859, has now overtaken the Bible as the world's most popular bestseller, according to official sources. The Bible is still selling over 400m copies a year in 190 languages, but *Origin* has now topped that for the first time in history, selling in excess of 500m copies in 2020.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Rt Rev Dustin Wellness, said he was "gutted" to hear the news, and Pope Francis said "*Origin of Species* has been on the Index of Prohibited Books for over a century and we have no plans to change its status. It is a horrid book".



David Brittain, Executive Editor of *Humanistically Speaking* and a big fan of Darwin said, "We are delighted to be able to bring you this exclusive news item on today of all days, 1st April".

BREAKING NEWS



Dorset Donates



At this year's AGM held via Zoom on Saturday 13th March, Chairman of Dorset Humanists David Warden (above) announced a £100 donation towards *Humanistically Speaking*, following a three minute 'plea' from our Executive Editor David Brittain.

David Warden said: *"Dorset Humanists' expenditure fell dramatically in 2020, mainly owing to moving our events online, and at the same time we've had two generous bequests and a Gift Aid rebate. And so our members were able to afford this donation towards the ongoing running costs of the UK's youngest new Humanist magazine".*

Like What We Do? Help Fund Us!



WHY

do we ask you for money?

As well as our ambition to upgrade our volunteers' technology, we've also created this booklet that we're eager to get printed and into places where the Internet may not reach. This will be prisons and hospitals in the first instance with wider scope beyond that. A monthly donation from many people will make all the difference.

Humanistically Speaking is created by unpaid volunteers, yet we do incur some costs and we'd like to expand our operations. Could you make a voluntary donation by Standing Order from just £1.00 a month? Or a one-off donation? We'll leave our bank details here and let you surprise us. Please use HS DONATION as the reference.

Account name: **Basingstoke Humanists**
Sort 30 98 97 – Acc 33031168

- Running Costs
- Technology upgrades
- Leaflet printing
- Travel expenses



Humanistically Speaking is for humanist groups everywhere, but our readership is growing and is fully open to non-humanists and persons of faith.

THE SECRETIVE WORLD OF LOBBYING

David Brittain
Executive Editor



In this article David Brittain highlights the work of authors Tamasin Cave and Andy Rowell who have exposed the secretive tactics of professional persuaders to influence our legislators. Is this a normal and acceptable part of democracy? Or is it a corporate takeover which drowns out democratic protest?

Lobbying is an attempt to steer or redirect thinking in Parliament and therefore the first rule for would-be lobbyists is to identify where the decision-making lies. Then you can select from the various approaches available to manipulate public opinion. So long as you have the wherewithal to promote your idea and establish your case as credible in the media you can make dissenting voices appear marginal and irrelevant.

The high-speed rail link is an example of lobbyists successfully creating 'spin' in the media. Ministers promoted the case for the construction of HS2 on the grounds of benefits for commuters but resistance rose when the £42 billion cost became known and especially when experts began expressing fears about environmental damage.

Unable to win the argument on cost and environmental grounds, professional lobbyists organised press releases about 'jobs for the North being held back by selfish landowners not wanting their fox-hunting grounds to be divided by railway lines' – and the headlines obliged. Slogans like '*Posh people standing in the way of working class jobs*' and '*Their lawns, our jobs*' changed public attitudes. But to this day, no one knows who these 'posh' objectors were!

Some lobbyists secretly fund a 'public outcry'



HS2: Lobbyists can manipulate the media in order to neutralise popular protest

or establish a 'voluntary' local committee or 'think-tank' in which the outcome is already assured because of the known opinions of those who are appointed. An example relates to the top rate tax reduction from 50p in 2012. Just before the budget, letters and adverts from hundreds of industrialists and financiers calling for a reduction were published in national newspapers, causing the Chancellor to take notice. The fact that it was later discovered that these letters emanated from overseas agencies made no difference. The campaign had been successful. The top tax rate in England and Wales is today just 45%.

Another technique employed is running a 'consultation exercise' – anything from focus groups, exhibitions, planning exercises and public meetings. It is a means of flushing ▶

out opposition and providing a managed channel through which would-be opponents can voice concerns. Residents in Barne Barton in Plymouth were asked in 2011 what they thought about a 95-metre incinerator being sited in their neighbourhood. Although more than 5,000 people objected, the waste company's planning application was waved through.

Lobbyists want governments to listen to *them*, not campaigners such as environmentalists, and they have developed tactics to neutralise opponents. Monitoring opposition groups is common, and rebuttal campaigns from the inside are frequently employed. Another strategy is a 'divide and rule' method that differentiates interest groups into friends and foes. Lobbyists build relationships with one side, whilst making it more difficult for other campaigners. Philip Morris's covert 10-year strategy to slow tobacco industry delegitimization and ensure the long-term social acceptability of smoking, codenamed Project Sunrise, intended to drive a wedge between various opposition groups and position them as extremists.

Then there are the more serious activities such as infiltration and spying. Household names such as Shell, BAE Systems and Nestlé have all been exposed by Wikileaks for spying on Greenpeace, Amnesty International and animal rights organisation Peta.

Another method is to flood the web with positive information and phony blogs for clients and 'press releases' that have no other purpose than to drive the output of critics down into the Google rankings, relying on the fact that few of us regularly click beyond the first page of search results. In this way, lobbyists make negative content 'disappear'. Attempts to doctor Wikipedia entries by the lobbying firm Bell Pottinger have also come to light.

And finally, there has been a perception, for the best part of a century, that decisions taken in government could be influenced by the reward of future employment. The top rung of the Department of Health, for example, has in recent years experienced huge traffic towards the private sector. And since 1996, officials and military officers have taken up literally thousands of jobs in arms and defence-related companies. Government is the arms industry's biggest customer and the MoD's closeness to its suppliers is widely known. The government is also gaining a reputation for disastrously expensive contracts that deliver poor value for taxpayers and commentators have asked whether the two are connected.

Of course, it would *not* be true to say that every politician is corrupt. There are many highly principled representatives in Parliament. But it is important to be aware that there are many vested interests that cling like barnacles wherever there is power, and it behoves of all of us to ask questions about where information comes from, who funds it, and to what end. It's a hard lesson to learn, but if we don't apply ourselves, what we call democracy will count for nothing against the secretive world of lobbyists.

Further reading

A Quiet Word: Lobbying, Crony Capitalism and Broken Politics in Britain (2015) by Tamasin Cave and Andy Rowell. Illustration below is from the book cover.

Q: What's worth £200,000,000, answers to no-one and operates out of public sight?

A: Lobbying



By Amelie Forbes

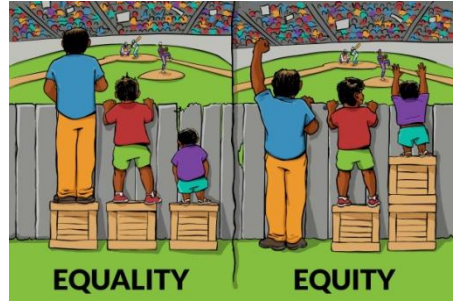
Amelie Analyzes

Being treated equally doesn't make us equal...

The debate around 'equality versus equity' has previously gone over my head. I thought that an equal society is possible if everyone is treated in the same way. Now, I'm not so sure...

First of all, let's define the terms. When I talk about *equality*, I mean everyone being treated the same way – being given the same resources and the same opportunities. When I talk about *equity*, I'm talking about people being treated differently according to their needs – those at a disadvantage being given extra support in order to be on the same level of advantage as others. Both equality and equity have the common goal of ensuring that all people are equal, although they evidently utilise different methods. A simple analogy that distinguishes the two is shown in the cartoon opposite. Equality has all of the people standing on the same size box, while equity gives taller boxes to the shorter people so that they can have the same view as their taller counterparts.

Applying equity, people at a disadvantage could be given the full support that they need. A key example of equity is in the distribution of wealth. In the UK, those who are in need receive benefits from the government. This is an example of equity because extra support is being given to those in need of financial support.



Treating people equally leads to unequal outcomes

Another example of where equity can be applied is in education. Extra support is given to students who are struggling in order to allow them to work at the same level as their peers. If all students were treated in the same way, students who are struggling would remain at a disadvantage because they wouldn't be receiving the support that they need in order to reach their full potential.

Why do we need LGBTQ+ pride?

A further example of equity is creating spaces for LGBTQ+ people, such as having July devoted to pride events. Pride celebrates the fact of being LGBTQ+ and allows people to freely be themselves. Pride is specifically for LGBTQ+ people, as opposed to heterosexual and cisgender people, because LGBTQ+ people are oppressed and discriminated against in many places around the world. This is an example of equity because it helps bring LGBTQ+ people up to the same level of acceptance and opportunity as heterosexual and cisgender people.

Equality



Equity



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Proportional fairness

It may seem contradictory for equality to potentially inhibit an equal society from forming. The issue with treating all people equally is that some people begin from a place of disadvantage. Therefore, treating all people equally would mean that the proportions of advantage would remain the same.

It's important to consider proportional fairness. Picture a person with crutches racing against a person without crutches. If both people start at the same time, the person without crutches is more likely to win the race because they are not being physically held back by the crutches. If the person with crutches is given a head start, both people would be just as likely to win the race because the person with crutches is no longer at a disadvantage. Equity allows all people to begin from the same position in terms of advantage, therefore creating a 'level playing field' – a proportionally fair system.

Some may object that advantaged people are being put at a disadvantage by not having that extra support. But the fact that those people are already at an advantage means that they do not need extra support.

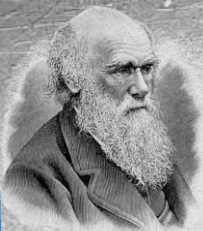
Conclusion

While it could be argued that it is potentially unethical to purposefully give people differing levels of support, I think that it makes more sense to give disadvantaged people the opportunity to no longer be at a disadvantage. Proportional fairness may not seem fair when the extra support is taken out of context, but when everyone's starting point is taken into consideration it seems, to me at least, to be the fairest way of achieving equal outcomes.

What do our readers think? Should we try to engineer 'equity' across all parts of society? Is this part of the government's 'levelling up' agenda?

Tell us what you think →

 send an email



Charles Darwin.

Dear Darwin

Ask Charles your difficult questions...



The Mount, Shrewsbury.
Darwin's family home.

Dear Darwin

I hope you remember me? This is your old friend and colleague, Alfred Russel Wallace, and there is one question that I have always wanted to ask you, and that has troubled me all the more after I died in 1913, and it follows thus:

You will recall that the public announcement of evolution really began in South America when – during a delusory bout of the *ague** I had a moment of inspiration – that only the creatures most suited to their environment flourished, whilst others died out. Thus by this simple means, evolution is driven – in stages - by changing environments. That sudden and indeed unexpected thought that species are not immutable so inspired me that I could hardly wait for my fit to pass before preparing a paper and sending a letter to you – a man I had never met, but had long admired – to share my most opportune discovery.

We now know, of course, that you had already fallen on the idea some years before, and indeed had produced a full account yourself. But you kept it secret until the day my letter arrived.

So my question to you is, why did you keep such a huge discovery to yourself until my letter arrived at your door?

** For our 21st century readers, 'ague' is malaria or another illness involving fever and shivering.*

Dear Wallace

How very kind of you to write after all these years.

You are perfectly correct to note that I kept my huge discovery to myself for many years. One reason, a trivial one perhaps, is that I found writing itself to be fiendishly difficult. But the principal reason was to protect my reputation and standing in society, and of course to protect my dear wife and family from social obloquy. You see my dear fellow, to be suspected of atheism in the first half of the 19th century entailed the dastardly corollary that one had no Christian morals, or any morals at all for that matter. I sensed that our great theory of evolution by natural selection would call into question the whole basis of biblical and Christian civilisation, and I was fearful to be the one who would bring the whole edifice crashing down.

By mid-century things were beginning to ease in that regard and my great friend Thomas Huxley came up with the brilliant idea of 'agnosticism' – a socially acceptable euphemism under which we infidels could shelter.

So there you have it – sheer terror at the likely consequences! Now my question for you. Why on earth does your middle name 'Russel' not have two l's?



Six reasons the Met were right to stop the protest.

Aaron Darkwood explores this controversial issue and asks: “Which takes precedence? Individual rights to protest or the responsibilities of the state to protect the majority under extreme conditions?” As thinking Humanists, we’re sure you’ll have a view...

Some very emotive images have reached our screens this week, and the police are being painted as the bad guys for doing their job. The media seem to want to stir this up, and the participants did their job perfectly in resisting arrest so that the entire situation got far worse than it needed to.

In this article I wasn't going to look at the death of a female, or reflect on how this death was more important than, say, the 188 other women who have sadly been killed in the past 12 months in a homicide. The ONS tell us: “In the latest year, there has been a 20% increase in the number of male victims (422 to 506). Conversely, the number of female victims fell by 16% (from 225 to 188), the first decrease since year ending March 2016” Details just for balance I may add.

So that's 695 victims of homicide, including 188 women, and a group decide that they need to hold an **illegal** vigil right now during the closing chapter of our Covid confinement. Mass gatherings are NOT permitted, yet they went ahead anyway knowing this.

1. Mass gatherings of any kind are illegal.

This should be quite clear on the very basis of the wording, and yet certain groups seem to think they are above the law, and that one criterion or another is the one exception where they can violate rules. Wrong.

2. It is to prevent the spread of a disease.

Whether you care about the law or not, you should have some consideration that the entire nation has been on lockdown to reduce deaths, and has succeeded. Thus holding a gathering and putting over a thousand people in close proximity is both selfish and dangerous.

3. One rule one for, one rule for the others.

Clearly rules have to be stuck to without exception. How can you ask people not to have family barbecues, gatherings, meet-ups and events involving, say, 6 or 8 people when it is okay for a thousand people to be huddled in the dark for a “protest of the week” style event. You can't. You have to be consistent or risk losing the backing of the entire population.

4. It's not fair on funerals. There are people who have the funerals of loved ones they want to attend, but can't due to the 30 restriction. How can you tell them they can't attend a funeral, when any random person can attend a vigil of someone they never knew?

5. It has put the police in danger. By the very nature of the job, police have to enter homes and are placed in danger each and every day from Covid infection. Making them have to manage a vigil/protest is completely irresponsible. It lacks empathy and compassion to place people who have no choice but to do their job facing a mass crowd of angry people.

6. Is it just a media stunt? Following on from the reactions, I can't help but see it as an anti-government / anti-authority event, aimed to stir up trouble.



This appeared in my social media stream yesterday posted by an anonymous female police officer at the scene:

“It started with mainly only female officers overlooking a civil vigil, but when numbers grew and social distancing seized, more officers were called. When police officers tried to crowd control and remove people from stamping on flowers for Sarah, they refused, then it kicked off. I saw people being arrested and my colleagues being assaulted when trying to transport a prisoner. I saw our vehicles being vandalised with spray and the words ACAB (All Cops Are Bastards) and a mirror being smashed. I heard my colleagues being abused, they were called murderers, rapists, a female colleague was told it should have been her.”

Looking at the overall picture, I can't help view it as an opportunity by the organisers to get back at the government. I am sure some there were genuine, but everyone knew they were breaking the law, and risking their lives for a person they mostly never knew. This wasn't the first female to die this year, but a group who wanted to capitalise on this “opportunity” did so to their advantage.

We are just months from being fully out of lockdown, and the country wants to be free, and return to normal life. I am pretty appalled and disgusted at the humanity displayed at this event and how the media is spinning it.

Yes, an innocent woman was murdered, but is this any more or less valid than the child murdered last week, and the man murdered yesterday? Isn't all murder bad? Or should we break the law to suit our own ends and satisfy our need to fight a cause to make ourselves look good?

I appear to be outnumbered in taking this viewpoint. What are your thoughts?



Ronnie Barr investigates whether young people are politically engaged or apathetic

Looking at the headlines it couldn't be clearer where young people stand when it comes to politics: we are one of the most politically active age groups on the planet... and one of the most completely disengaged... who also spend all their time fighting the system... however we know nothing about politics compared to our older counterparts... but we know enough to have the voting age lowered to sixteen... even though there aren't enough young people already signed up and voting now. The message is clear alright, that no one seems to quite understand how politics affects young people and that it definitely does not affect us all in the same way!

Political education in school

Political education in the UK is a mixed bag. Some schools will do a lot to inform their students about current events, the importance of voting, and how to make informed opinions without relying on clickbait and who your parents vote for. Others won't talk about politics at all. I attended my local grammar school where it was completely normal to discuss important issues in the

news on a daily basis and take part in extra-curriculars like school council and youth parliament. Upon entering sixth form when I realised I knew far less about how the UK government works than I felt I should I switched one of my AS Levels from Media Studies to Government and Politics in order to gain a better understanding of the subject.

Unfortunately, there are many schools in the country that simply don't provide the same level of political education for young people. Although politics is one of the four key areas for Citizenship on the National Curriculum, academies don't have to follow the curriculum and can choose not to teach it. Given the increase in academies across the country with three-quarters of secondary schools having become them, Citizenship studies, and as a result political education, have been severely impacted.

Politics or PlayStation 4?

While many of my former classmates went on to study politics at university or get actively involved in their various political student union societies I moved into supported housing and got the shock of my life. All of my new housemates were out of touch with what was happening in the news, none of them were signed up to vote, and although a couple of them understood the importance of ▶



Ronnie (left) with the Patchwork Foundation which encourages disadvantaged young people to attend political events

standing up for specific issues like LGBT+ rights they felt that most political matters didn't affect them in the slightest and weren't worth caring about. During the local elections I was the only person to make sure my voting details were correct and that I could submit my ballot. Meanwhile my housemates stayed holed up in their rooms on their PlayStation 4s.

The importance of schools, families, and social media

This disconnect was baffling to me at first. I had friends dedicating huge chunks of their time to political activism, my partner back then had even moved across the country with the sole intent to study, volunteer, and work in politics! It has become increasingly clear since that, although I and many of my friends were lucky enough to have schools and families that cared about the importance of educating us about democracy, not everyone had that privilege and for some this meant they became disengaged from politics altogether. For others, recognising the lack of accessibility meant they had to get creative to get heard.

I'm sure many of you have been on social media before or are at least aware of the kind of content that circulates on many of those platforms. While primarily created and used for staying in touch with others, social media is rapidly evolving into a place to gain access to the news and to make a stand. Petitions can be easily signed and shared on Facebook, and Twitter hashtags can help bring prominence to important issues that may otherwise be overlooked. Even with the rise of social media, protesting in the real world still has its place too. Whether you agree with these methods or not protesting makes it very clear that we feel something is wrong and that our government aren't listening and giving an issue the attention it deserves, especially when our politicians seem to be going against what the public wants.

Organisations which can help

While people argue about whether these alternative ways of getting involved are valid and effective rapid change is needed to allow more young people to understand and get involved in democracy and political education. Organisations like the [Patchwork Foundation](https://patchworkfoundation.org.uk/) have been setting up programmes to encourage young people from disadvantaged and minority communities to learn more about our government and attend political events, and the team at [Simple Politics](http://simplepolitics.co.uk/) dedicate their time to sharing key information from the news in a clear and impartial way for us to understand.

All young people are different, they have different backgrounds and upbringings and most importantly they have different opinions and different ways of getting involved and standing up for change. While we're definitely a generation that's trying to be more politically active we still need help to ensure politics is accessible for everyone.

Brittain Interviews...

Our video conference with notable Humanists, interviewed by David Brittain

A. C. Grayling

Humanists UK Patron Professor Grayling discusses his latest book **The Good State** with our Executive Editor, David Brittain. Grayling explains why our democracy is *nowhere near* as democratic as we like to think, and how the system gives way to the polarised, and extreme politics of today. He explains why the West is in great danger, and that the invasion of the White House should come as no surprise. Click on the button below to view the whole one hour interview.

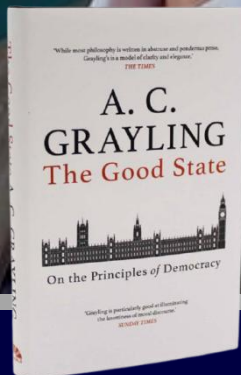
Subscribers to Humanistically Speaking will have the chance to win one of four copies of *The Good State*, but this is open to subscribers only. If you are Not a subscriber? Just [email us](#) and type 'Subscribe'. We will do the rest.

For the full video interview please click below.



"Government should be a service for all the people, not just those on one side or the other of some argument"

"At the last election, an 80 seat majority was won on just 43% of the votes cast. It means that 29% of the electorate gave 100% power to one party"



"Our first past the post system so excludes people from the decision-making process that they might quite rightly decide that their vote doesn't count"

Who would you like us to interview next?:
Humanistically.Speaking@gmail.com





Humanism and republicanism: Is it time to dump the monarchy?

Humanism and republicanism are natural allies. The idea that you can be born into the job of head of state is irrational, undemocratic, and absurd.

The reason why there was no equivalent to the French Revolution in England is because our monarchy, unlike the Bourbons, had already rolled back from absolutism. We settled into the compromise of 'constitutional monarchy' whereby the monarch's powers have been effectively ceded to the elected Prime Minister. By and large, the British people love their ancient monarchy with all the glamour, flummery, and celebrity that goes with it. We also appreciate the stability and continuity of monarchy, relative to other political arrangements.

Most people are willing to affirm that the Queen has done an exemplary job as head of state for seventy years. But the human toll on the Windsor family has been immense. The fact that this dysfunctionality is still playing out in 2021 is depressingly awful.

The Queen is praised for her lifetime of duty but it would have been eminently sensible, generous and humane if she had retired at the age of 75 and allowed Charles to succeed her. But Charles himself is already 72 and could well be 80 by the time he becomes king. Many people assume that the succession will skip a generation but whichever way you look at it, the system is cruel and absurd.

I haven't followed the tabloid tittle-tattle ▶



The explosive Oprah Winfrey interview with the Duke and Duchess of Sussex

about Meghan Markle and yet the widespread prejudice about her had infected my own thinking. I watched the two-hour interview with Oprah Winfrey and found it compelling. What I saw was two young people who had escaped from an institutional prison which had failed in its basic humanity towards them.

The British people are infantilised by their monarchy. Just a few miles away across the Irish Sea we have an example of a grown-up republic. Ireland has had some very distinguished elected heads of state including Mary Robinson and Mary McAleese.

We will, of course, continue to incarcerate the Windsor-Mountbattens in their castles and palaces. I hope, for their sake, that William and Kate will succeed in reforming and modernising this ancient institution. But if there were a referendum on whether to keep the monarchy or go for a republic I'm sure I would vote for change.

David Warden

What are your views on monarchy and republicanism?

humanistically-speaking@gmail.com



Thought for the Day

David Warden reflects on Nietzschean amoralism and utter nihilism...

I follow someone with the unusual name of 'Capel Lofft' on Twitter who occasionally tweets unflattering things about Humanism and atheism. It turns out that Capel Lofft was a British lawyer and amateur astronomer who died in 1824. So it's remarkable that he has a social media presence in the 21st century.

A recent tweet asserted that 'The only truly logical paths for the sincere atheist are Nietzschean amoralism or just utter nihilism. It is possible those worldviews are true, which is very, very bleak. But they are the only options my heathen friends. What it boils down to is this: you cannot keep the fluffy bits of Christian morality and get rid of all the inconvenient dogmas and beliefs and expect to come out with a coherent and plausible worldview at the end of it. It is the ultimate having your cake and eating it'.

Well maybe we'd better start with Nietzsche. It's probably unfair to claim that he was an 'amoralist'. He certainly had no time for Christian morality which he thought suitable for slaves. He preached a kind of egoistic self-assertion in his philosophy which, at the very least, can be thought of as a healthy corrective to Christian subservience and selflessness. As for 'utter nihilism', this is probably Lofft's pejorative term for two of the



The original Capel Lofft has a modern avatar on Twitter

beliefs which underpin modern Humanism, namely naturalism and materialism. It is simply inconceivable to him that morality can exist in a godless universe.

Humanism does not attempt to 'keep the fluffy bits of Christian morality' whilst getting rid of inconvenient dogmas. Humanism is based on the pre-Christian moral ideas of living a good life and creating good societies in which people can flourish. There is no need for any 'inconvenient dogmas' to underpin this worldview. It arises from our nature as hominids who seek the good for ourselves and those in our social groups. Our main challenge is to extend our sympathies beyond our social groups to include as many of our fellow human beings as possible.

Do you have a *Thought for the Day* worth sharing?

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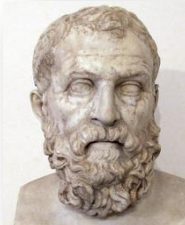
Musings by Maggie

The Dawn of Democracy – when was it exactly?

It's the accepted wisdom that the origins of what we now think of as a democratic system of government date to Athens in the early 6th century BCE, but there were certainly earlier forms of rule which could be considered broadly democratic.

Anthropologists now hypothesise that forms of proto-democracy existed among our primitive ancestors.

Anthropological studies of small hunter gatherer communities still in existence today have revealed that these associations of around 50 to 100 people come to collective decisions purely by consensus, often without the authority of a leader or chief (Olsen, 1993). It is thought that it was not until the agricultural revolution, when humans began to settle in agrarian communities, that any more formal arrangement was found to be necessary. The agricultural way of life brought with it inequalities of wealth and power, which meant that the less fortunate members of the community were often left unprotected from famine, theft or maltreatment. It was the first time our ancestors had experienced the existence of the 'haves and have nots'. Larger associations (tribes, towns, cities, states) are not amenable to true democracy in the sense of government by the people. Therefore, some form of political system becomes necessary.



Athenian statesman, lawmaker and poet **Solon** is often credited with having laid the foundations for Athenian democracy (6th century BCE).

Clearly, violent anarchy does not work to the advantage of anyone in a society, since those who lose are provided with little incentive to produce goods that can be accessed either by themselves or others. Even a thief does not profit by theft if there is nothing to steal. How, then, have we managed, as a species, not only to survive but to be so successful in evolutionary terms? American economist and political scientist Mancur Olson wrote about his own discovery of a possible answer to this question by referring to the situation in China in the 1920s, when much of the country was governed by warlords. They would take a region by military force and then plunder the wealth of that region by means of heavy taxation. Although it would seem, at first sight, rather puzzling, the population of those regions actually preferred living under these warlords, because they protected them from roving bandits, who would take everything they owned and then move on, whereas the warlords took the form of what Olsen calls 'stationary bandits'.

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They did at least provide a kind of peaceful order and some public goods in exchange for the regular collection of taxes so that the people would have some incentive to continue producing goods that could be taxed. These autocracies eventually became ruling dynasties, a system of government arising from the dominance of self-interested parties, which cannot remotely be described as democratic. However, as Olsen notes, 'Autocrats of all kinds usually claim that their subjects want them to rule and thereby nourish the unhistorical assumption that government arose out of some kind of voluntary choice.'

Although 19th century intellectuals believed that the ancient Greeks were the founders of Western civilization, and promoted the Greek system as a model for post-monarchical governments in Europe, this system was developed much later than in other ancient civilizations (Morris, 2013). Some scholars have suggested that in pre-Babylonian Mesopotamia major decisions, such as going to war, were taken by councils formed of elders and free men, most likely the military, and this could be considered an early form of democracy. But this theory is by no means widely accepted due to the stretch of imagination required to apply the term 'democracy' to such a system (Isakhan, 2007).

The early Greek city-state of Sparta, although an oligarchy, was ruled by two kings (a system referred to as a *diarchy*) with a Council of Elders (*gerontes*) overseen by citizens' representatives (*ephors*). In addition, there was the *apella*, an assembly of male citizens over the age of thirty who elected the members of the *gerousia* and the *ephors*. This system of rule, by tradition considered to be



In China in the 1920s, the rule of warlords such as **Wu Pei-fu** (known as the 'Jade Marshall') were preferable to roving bandits.

the creation of the great legendary Spartan lawgiver Lycurgus around 700 BCE, does appear to bear significant resemblance to a democracy. Lycurgus is traditionally credited with instituting the *Great Rhetra* (literally 'Great Saying' or 'Proclamation'), which is thought to be the first written constitution.

Athens in the 7th century BCE, generally considered to be the cradle of democracy, was dominated by a powerful aristocracy under which a great deal of political unrest developed, leading eventually to a popular uprising in the 6th century BCE. The lyric poet-turned-lawmaker, Solon is the person usually credited with the early foundation of Athenian democracy, having instituted many reforms in 594, giving Athens its first comprehensive code of law.

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Letters & Emails

Humanistically Speaking appreciated during lockdown...

At our recent AGM, members expressed a wish to make a donation of £50 to *Humanistically Speaking*. Many have enjoyed reading the publication, and are very keen for it to continue! I'm sure you'll be able to put the money to good use. On behalf of the group, many thanks to you, and your team, for all your hard work in getting *Humanistically Speaking* started, and for continuing with its regular publication, which has been especially appreciated during lockdown!

Linda Montgomery, Farnham Humanists

Is naked protest the best policy?

What a wealth of humanity is within the pages of *Humanistically Speaking*! I have just watched your interview with Maryam Namazie. A few years ago I attended the 'One Law for All' conference held near London Bridge. I have never been so moved by the stories of men and women who had found the courage to follow their hearts and leave their faith which may well mean losing their family. I am a great admirer of Maryam but I'm not sure about the 'Calendar Girls'. I understand why, but for people who have lived under the oppression and fears of their faith, is the best course not to give them confidence, not add to their fears by throwing off all clothes? Thank you and all the *Humanistically Speaking* team for this inspiring, interesting, well designed monthly publication. A huge amount of thought, time and work given to us all. You are all awesome.

Sue Shaw, Farnham Humanists

How to change our failing system - revolution or reform?

There are only two ways to change a failing system – revolution and reform. As people only come onto the streets in overwhelming numbers when their lives have become truly intolerable we should probably assume that armed revolt is not going to happen any time soon in the 'western democracies'.

So, to reform. How do ordinary people wrest power from a ruling elite? One reform must be to engage people in local democratic institutions. This is not necessarily as difficult as one might assume. Ordinary people are quick to form committees when a local issue requires local attention. People will become involved when they think they can make a difference.

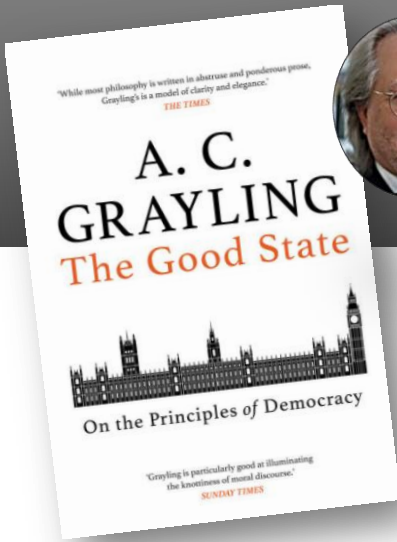
Probably the most important element in reform would be to abolish political parties. Then, a local councillor or MP would not be elected because he or she is part of the Labour, LibDem or Conservative parties, with the mechanics and finances of that party behind them. The absence of political parties would ensure that MPs would genuinely speak for their electorate, and not be influenced by those lobbying their Party Chiefs, or by the Whip system.

These reforms would need to be linked to a system of enforced voting, such as they have in Australia – so that there would be penalties for anyone eligible to vote who, without an acceptable reason, can't be bothered.

Yours, Allan Frewin Jones

(This email was shortened for reasons of space)

'The Good State: On the Principles of Democracy' (2020) by A. C. Grayling



A. C. Grayling (photo above) is Master of the New College of the Humanities in London, a Vice President of Humanities UK, a Patron of Dignity in Dying and our foremost philosopher of Humanism.

Humanists often think philosophically about the nature of 'the good life'. In this book, a sequel to *Democracy and Its Crisis* (2017), A. C. Grayling thinks incisively about the nature of 'the good state'.

It's no secret that Grayling is motivated by deep concern about what he sees as the failings of our 'Westminster Model' of democracy. He believes that its weaknesses resulted in Brexit – an outcome he deplores.

One of Grayling's distinctive arguments, both in this book and in his interview with David Brittain, is that '*politics* is too often the enemy of government – at least of good government' and he argues that 'government has to be drained of politics as far as possible'. Politicians are so reviled nowadays it's tempting to agree. But it seems evident to me that this is why a majority of voters rejected

membership of the European Union. It was precisely because the EU seeks to drain governance of politics and, *ipso facto*, effectively place it beyond the reach of democracy. Jean-Claude Juncker, when he was President of the European Commission, said 'There can be no democratic choice against European treaties'. It is this high disdain for politics and democracy which resulted in Brexit. Politics is the lifeblood of democracy.

Grayling is opposed to our 'first past the post' system, arguing that 'a voter supporting a losing candidate is unrepresented in such a system'. Constitutionally, this is untrue. MPs are expected to represent the interests of *all* their constituents in Parliament whether they voted for him/her or not. Grayling deplores our 'duopoly' of parties taking turns at 'one-party rule'. He believes that we should adopt a system of proportional representation which, by producing coalition government, would 'reduce the political nature of government'. Our experience of coalition government of 2010-2015 and especially the chaotic hung Parliament of 2017-2019 do not seem to me to have resulted in 'depoliticised government'.

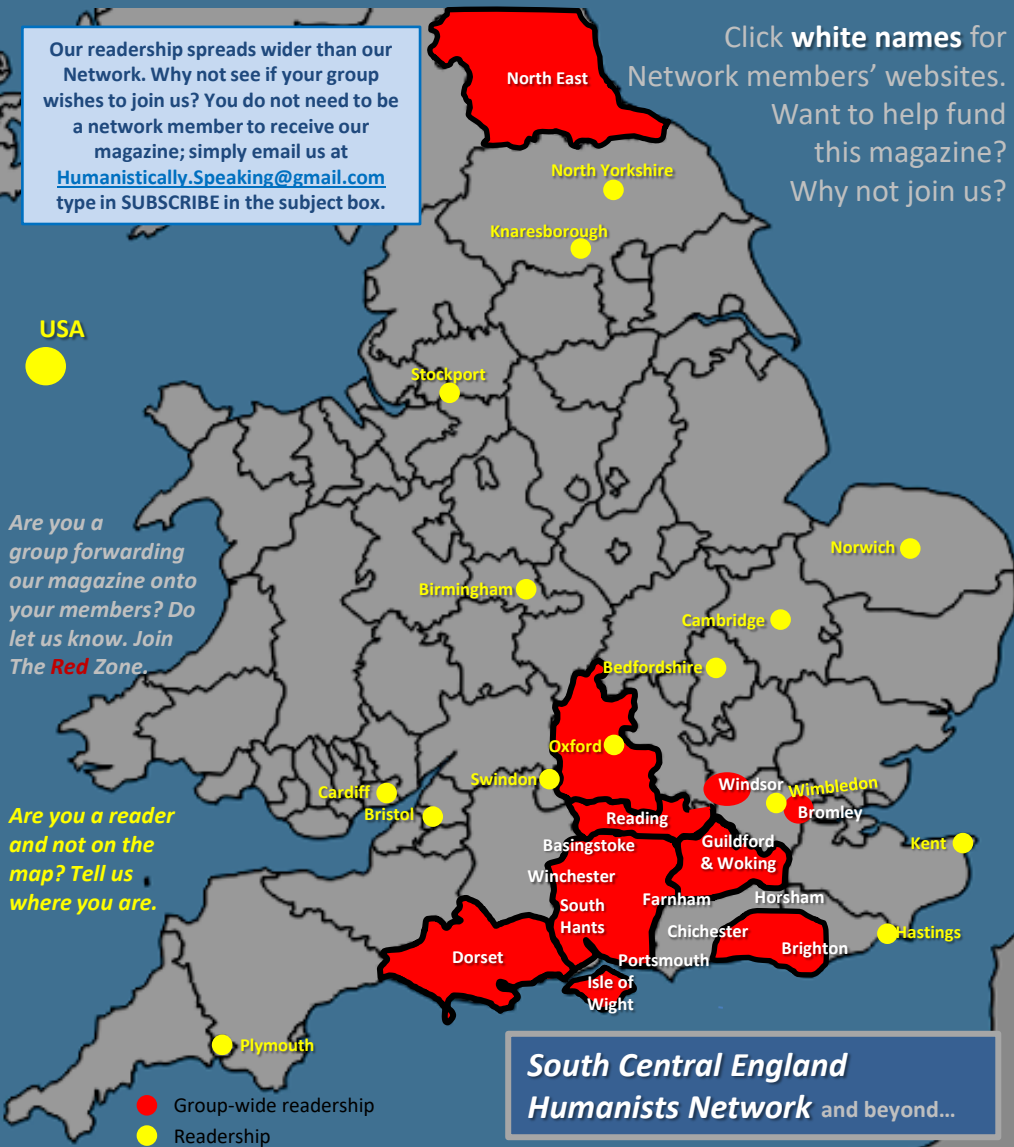
Grayling is a superb philosopher but it's difficult to resist the conclusion that this book is an elitist manifesto against what, following Plato, he scornfully calls 'ochlocracy' – rule by the ignorant mob. Democracy is fine, he seems to be arguing, as long as it is practised by a wise elite insulated from the messy conflicts of politics. The most famous democratic response to that argument is '*No, No, No.*'

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