

Victoria  
Votes 2014

# Democracy the Jewish way

## Viewpoint

JEREMY STOWE-LINDNER



Reflections on the benefits and flaws in our electoral system.

WINSTON Churchill was nuanced on the subject of democracy. “The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter,” he said, while also suggesting that “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.”

Victoria is about to go to the polls. Across the pond in the USA the balance of power has shifted dramatically in favour of the Republicans, who now control both Houses of Congress and face an unpopular Democrat President.

As 21st-century enlightened “Western”-orientated citizens, the conventional wisdom is to embrace the concept of democracy as an ideal for all forms of government. The concept of government of the people by the people and for the people, to paraphrase our American cousins, is one that we accept and promote. After all, the alternatives are, in various forms, imposed and dictatorial.

But do we have true democracy? I leave myself out of the debate since, as a permanent resident rather than a citizen, I face “taxation without representation” – a rallying cry to the American revolutionaries in the 1750s and 1760s (and still found on Washington DC car registration plates, since Washington DC elects no representative to the legislature). Fear not, though – I am not about to go into Port Philip Bay and pour tea into our tranquil waters in defiance of British monarchical rule.

When teaching politics, we talk

often of the “tyranny of the majority” in democratic systems, whereby individual groups’ rights and desires can be ignored due to their numerical inferiority. Take France, for example, where the legislature has banned religious symbols in public buildings (including schools). While this may have had its origins in a rejection of Islamic symbols, it also has an impact on Christians displaying the cross, or Jews wearing a kippah. Where is the voice of and for the minority?

And it is not just the tyranny of the majority with which we can be concerned. It can be the electoral system itself which, in its various forms, can produce wildly different results. A proportional system, through which the number of representatives is proportional to the percentage support for each political party, may produce one type of parliament (such as the ones we face in Australia, allocating places to small minority parties which may represent a fringe interest, such as motoring enthusiasts). Another system, such as the “first past the post” system, allocates a representa-

True authority which stands the test of time is power that is given, not snatched or assumed.

tive in each constituency to the individual in that area who receives the highest number of votes. The recent Scottish referendum revealed an interesting fact: the last time that Scotland gave both a majority of the popular vote and a majority of the seats to any political party was in 1955.

So what is the answer? Is it to constantly tinker with the electoral system because, as Churchill said, democracy is the best system we have?

I would advocate some interesting checks on the democratic system. I regard myself as a democrat, but a few years ago a visit to the House of Lords, the “upper house” in the UK’s legislature, persuaded me of the merits of an entirely unelected, unaccountable group as part of the democratic process. With a supreme

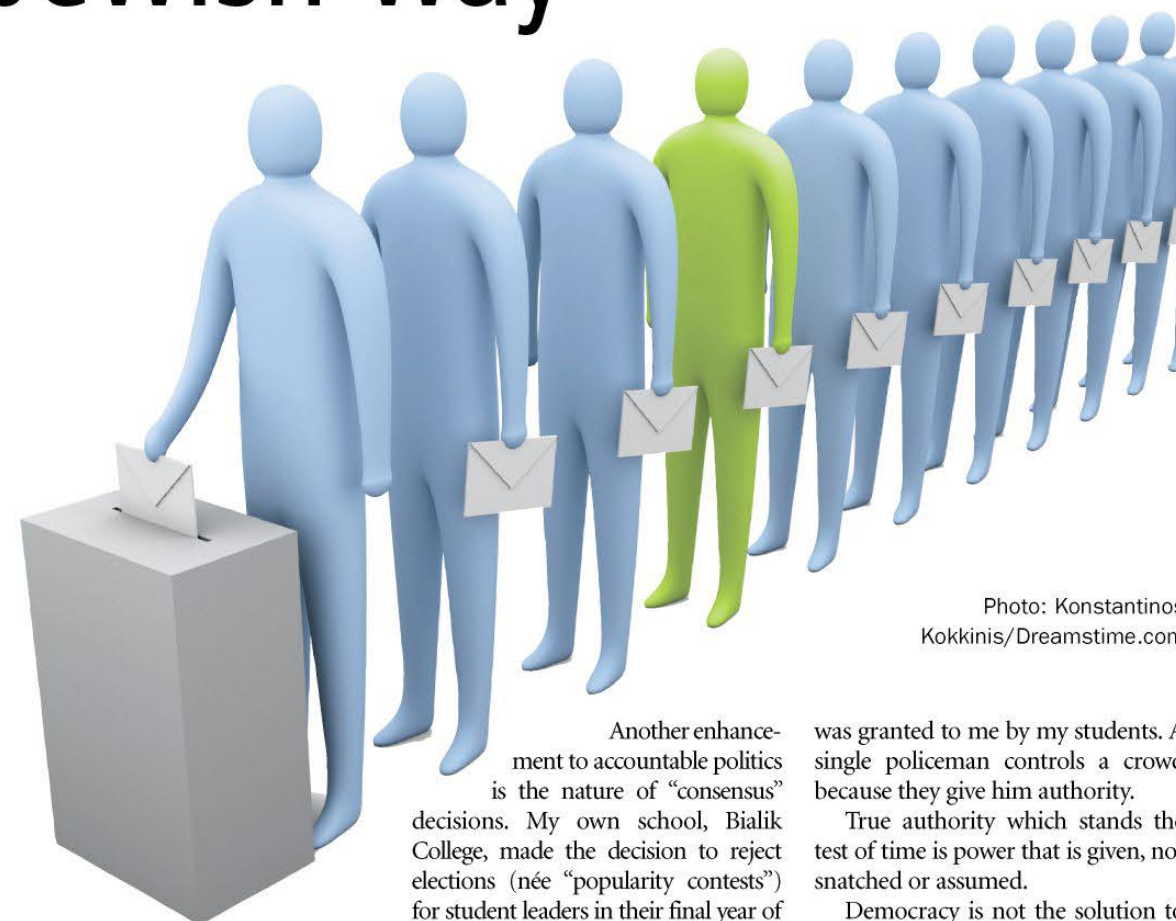


Photo: Konstantinos Kokkinis/Dreamstime.com

Another enhancement to accountable politics is the nature of “consensus” decisions. My own school, Bialik College, made the decision to reject elections (née “popularity contests”) for student leaders in their final year of school. The principal has no role in approving their accession. The students self-select themselves through challenges and then become leaders through their actions and dugma (personal example).

This approach occurs in many walks of life. Jewish leaders are often appointed through consensual, rather than democratic processes – we should reflect upon how great rabbis earn respect. Consider some of the great (and deceased) rabbis of recent times: Feinstein, Soloveitchik or even Schneerson. Rabbinical authority is assumed only through consensus.

When I teach politics, my first lesson involves instructing students to stand up, turn around, stand on one foot, and sit down again. Following this bizarre set of instructions, we discuss why students followed these instructions, and we conclude that students were obedient not because of my election or my physical prowess (neither of which I am in a position to boast about). It was because power

was granted to me by my students. A single policeman controls a crowd because they give him authority.

True authority which stands the test of time is power that is given, not snatched or assumed.

Democracy is not the solution to our problems, but nor is it the source of our ills. Democracy is not the panacea to world peace but we need to see it in its mosaic of colours, not just in black and white. The checks and balances of appointments, consensus, a free press and at times underhand decision-making are exactly what make the democratic process so healthy – and the key is in the word “process”, not simply a rigid system.

So when you go to the polls this week and you vote, consider a few things. Are you part of the benevolent majority or the tyrannical majority? Are you a “heard” minority or an ignored one? And beyond polling, how can we all contribute to the process?

But most importantly, think of people like me – a rare breed with no vote but with an active pen.

Jeremy Stowe-Lindner is principal of Bialik College and is a teacher of philosophy and history.

lower house which has the power to (eventually) overrule the Lords, the Lords are a genuine, independent check on power. They are appointed as the “great and the good” – religious leaders, military tacticians, doctors, professors, researchers, businesspeople and the like. They are appointed for life and despite their supposed party affiliations, they are rebellious, rancorous and unpredictable. The fact of the longevity of their appointments (they are Lords until they die) and the impossibility of disbarment (other than for rare occasions of illegality, as was the case for the author Jeffrey Archer) means that they vote according to conscience, not party lines.

This is a controversial, unelected and unaccountable aspect of government which I highly recommend.