

**“Government must depend for its Efficiency either on Force or Opinion.”** *From ‘The Colonist’s advocate’, VII. (Feb 1, 1770)*

We have become accustomed, today, to seeing our own societies as the pinnacle of human achievement because we have reached a settlement which once appeared impossible: a society governed not by force but by opinion. The promise of a liberal democracy is that the weight of the majority ought to be greater than that of the strong and that persuasion should reign where coercion once governed human affairs. When Benjamin Franklin observed, in 1770, that all governments must rest either upon *force* or *opinion* for their ‘efficiency’ (by which he, a man of the eighteenth century, meant what we now term *efficacy*), he was advancing what was not then a commonplace, but instead a remarkable rejection of the existing order of political life. That force ruled in the world of politics was accepted by almost all of Franklin’s contemporaries. Prior to the eighteenth century, it had been almost universally held that public peace required force to keep the people “in awe”, as Thomas Hobbes put it, and the same sentiment remained widely accepted amongst Franklin’s peers. It was his faith in the possibility of a government founded not upon force but upon opinion that led Franklin to stand amongst those who sought to establish a new nation founded on the ideal of self-government when the revolution of 1776 arrived, and it was the same conviction which guided his career as a revolutionary statesman and philosopher. Franklin was amongst those politicians, philosophers, and ordinary citizens who, at the end of the eighteenth century, engaged in a great experiment to discover whether it was possible for mankind to “establish good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force”, as Alexander Hamilton put it at the beginning of the first of the *Federalist Papers*. The result was the birth of modern liberal democracy and the end of a world in which power rested on violence alone. For his part in inaugurating this epochal reordering of human relations, Franklin earned the epithet of ‘the Solon of North America’ from his contemporaries, who ranked him alongside the mythical Athenian lawgiver in his contribution to the cause of human freedom.

Yet in a less utopian age, we might have reason to doubt this strict dichotomy between those regimes founded on force and those founded on opinion. Unlike eighteenth century writers like Franklin, we have come to be suspicious of democracy and attuned to the potential for majority rule to

degenerate into tyranny or for popular self-rule to beget the abuse of the rights of minorities. As the French writer Alexis de Tocqueville (who coined the term ‘the tyranny of the majority’) argued in his famous book *Democracy in America*, although democracy might liberate us from the oppression of kings and aristocrats, it can just as often place us under the yolk of our fellow citizens. Far from passing from the government of force to a free government based on opinion, we pass instead from one form of rule by force to another, from that of a minority to that of the majority. Indeed, if we were to take a very pessimistic view of democratic life, we might argue that it is not founded on free debate and a rational process of deliberation, but upon the implicit force which the majority possesses to force the minority to follow its dictates. On this view, the legitimacy of the majority at the ballot box comprises nothing more than mutual acceptance that, were it to come to it, the numerically superior majority would prevail in a contest of force.

Even if we do not hold so dark a view of democracy, it is still hard to avoid the sense that so much of modern political and social life is ruled by the compulsion of mobs rather than the reasonable exchange of opinions. All too often public discourse degenerates into a contest over who can rally more – and more vitriolic – support, and dispassionate debate gives way to tribal conflict. What is often called ‘cancel culture’ today can be viewed differently as an inevitable fact of political life in a free country and not a product of a rising illiberalism. Where we are free to hold whatever opinions we wish, we tend to quickly form tribal attachments and behave with hostility towards those who disagree with us. Having initially agreed with our allies on some particular issue, our impulse to conform flattens all dissension until an initially pluralistic political coalition comes to reject any deviation from a broader programme of shared aims and all dissent is quashed by the mob. When tempered, our impulse to form factions leads to benign political competition and a diversity of views, but when unrestrained in this manner it can lead to bitter partisanship and, paradoxically, the elimination of the freedom of thought and opinion of which it is the product. This is a dynamic which was as characteristic of the tumultuous (and far more vicious) politics of Britain and her American colonies in the eighteenth century as it is of the age of the Twitter mob. One of Franklin’s contemporaries, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, though often unfairly tarred as a defender of this mob democracy was in fact one of the most perceptive critics of this dynamic of democratic life. As he

wrote in *The Social Contract*, “If, when the people, being furnished with adequate information, held its deliberations, the citizens had no communication with one another, the grand total of the small differences would always give the general will”. What Rousseau was arguing was not literally that citizens be cut off from one another, but that an ideal democracy should seek to promote independence of thought in its citizens. What Rousseau recognised, and we have forgotten, was that where we allow the opinions of others to dictate our political engagements democratic self-rule is degraded. The government of opinion thus becomes another species of government by force, with the only difference being that it is the fear of our fellow citizens and not of a tyrant which motivates obeisance.

But the dream of a government constituted on the basis of the free exchange of opinions should not be discarded entirely on this count. Rather, understanding this dynamic and the decay to which democratic government is prone demands that we work harder to achieve the noble dream of a politics founded not on violence and coercion but debate and persuasion. It requires us all to reject both immoderate and intemperate attacks, even upon those we regard as heinous, in favour of a stringent commitment to open debate and the possibility of our defeat in a fair and equal public square. At the same time, it requires us to commit to approaching politics with an independence of mind which prevents us from simply following the herd and aping those who we admire or with whom we usually agree. We must stand up for what we believe in even when it is unfashionable, champion causes which might seem unpopular, risk being placed in front of the mob’s wrath and defend those who do, even when we disagree with them. It is only by doing so that we can prevent the rule of public opinion from degenerating into the rule of fashion and conformity, in which deference to monarchs and despots is replaced by deference to popularity. If we do not, we risk sacrificing government based on opinion for government based solely on the opinion of the majority, whose tendency is towards a transformation into rule by the force of the greatest number and the persecution of minorities of all kinds.

When Benjamin Franklin wrote, just over two and a half centuries ago, that “Government must depend for its Efficiency either on Force or Opinion” he offered a noble prediction that the liberal form of government then emerging both in the United Kingdom and her American colonies

represented a viable alternative to the rule of force. The centuries which followed have shown that Franklin's optimism must be tempered with a recognition that democracies may descend into rancour and collapse into combat between factions, and that the government of opinion can descend into the domination of the majority. This does not mean, as is often supposed, the collapse of democracy into a dictatorship backed by the majority, but is found every day in the stifling of genuine debate by the overwhelming pressure for the individual to conform in all aspects of life both through social sanction and, at times, through bullying, coercion, and force. Yet we should not rule out the possibility of a government genuinely based in opinion. Instead, we should aim to model the kind of independent and steadfast political conduct which, as Shakespeare put it, shows our love for the people without relishing their loud applause and *Aves* vehement. Only then might we hope to realise Franklin's dream.