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Disenfranchised



For most of recorded human history leaders of humans have ruled without a ‘by your leave’. Most have been men and most leaders have inherited their power or have taken it by force. There have been exceptions, both in paths to rulership and that a few of the rulers were women; and some rulers were benevolent.

Democracy, a system in which the ruled choose their rulers, is a relatively modern phenomenon and it is, mostly, limited – that is, those who choose their rulers have limited power beyond the ballot.

Even in a society we consider as being the first democracy – Athens 2,500 years ago – there was limited suffrage: there was no participation by women or slaves or men who did not own land. In modern times, women did not have a vote anywhere until the late nineteenth century – in Switzerland women were only granted the vote federally in 1971 (in a few cantons they were allowed to vote from 1959 on).

There are still many countries where election of the government does not exist or is a sham because there is no effective choice of candidates.

It can also be argued that in many ‘western’ countries, despite having all the hallmarks of a free, fair and open election system, there is a growing and worrying development: governments are increasingly ignoring the ‘will of the people’ when it comes to policy; they base what they do on ideology and policy is tempered by lobbying and donations from large, wealthy industries.

Governments used to listen to the wise and the well-informed in order to come to solutions that serve the majority of the citizens or even the whole population. Now they largely have scant regard for such expert advice, often dismissing it as ‘politically motivated’ or ‘elitist’; or something to be simply ignored because it runs counter to the current government ideology or the interests of their commercial supporters.

Major issues that are of global concern, such as the changing climate and the massive human dislocation caused by wars, tend to be not effectively addressed; and those who agitate for action are often roundly vilified as having an axe to grind.

Members of the Australian conservative governments have for decades argued against concerted action to address increasing CO₂ and CH₄ concentrations in the atmosphere on the basis that they do not believe this increase to be due to human activity. Therefore, they argue,

there is no point in changing human activity in order to reduce the concentrations or to slow down the increase. Much of this attitude is fuelled by the money and lobbying of industries whose activities are contributing to the problem. There have been statements to the effect of “I don’t deny the science, but I am choosing to ignore it.”

Critics of the inhumane treatment of asylum seekers are mostly labelled as crackpots and ideologues, even when they are doctors, social workers, psychologists or the UNHCR.

Probably because of a growing sense of futility, an increasing number of people in many countries have opted out of political participation, even to the extent of no longer voting. While this is understandable, it is counterproductive. Not voting in government elections is not an option if we want the attitude of governments to change. While the malaise touches political parties of all colours, participating in elections is the first and most basic step towards re-empowerment and re-enfranchisement. But voting is only part of it.

Democratic government is not just about stepping into a polling booth every three to four years – it is more about day-to-day involvement by citizens. Theoretically, democracy is about governments, once elected, consulting and listening to others; it is about engagement. When governments stop listening, citizens need to individually and collectively make themselves heard.

Political change has, in the recent past, come about through mass non-violent action by citizens – for instance the anti-Vietnam War rallies in the 1970s. Some sixty years further back, concentrated action by women – and men supporting them – brought about the reality of universal suffrage in many countries. As in the civil rights campaigns in the USA, action for change can gather enough momentum that governments have to take action to bring about that change.

But voting, even if you feel it to be a futile activity, could be a step towards identifying yourself as giving a damn *and* moving towards doing something about the stifling pall of right-wing, abusive behaviour and language that passes for politics these days.