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MAKE DEMOCRACY GREAT AGAIN

— Robin Shepherd

In political discourse in the United States and beyond, it is now commonplace to agree that Western democracies are in trouble. How many column inches have been devoted to the disconnect between established elites and the people in whose name they govern?

The spirit of the times is filled with despair about what is happening, and bewilderment about how to put things right.

But there is no need for despair. Fashionable anguish is largely a misplaced emotion borne of a profound misunderstanding of the revolutionary times in which we live. Indeed, by embracing change, we can, and we will, forge a path to a brighter future – a veritable democratic renaissance.

There are three key steps to take before we get there.

First, we need to stop blaming the public and acknowledge that the problems are real. After former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder left office only to fall into the arms of Vladimir Putin's Gazprom, after former British Prime Minister Tony Blair made tens of million of Pounds Sterling following his premiership by advising (sometimes dubious) foreign governments, and when banks that ruined Western economies pay huge bonuses to their top bosses, public disquiet cannot be attributed to the crazed fantasies of opportunists and populists.

And after a massive war in the Middle East was unleashed by an American-led coalition on a false (even if not a knowingly false) pretext, voters should not be condemned as irrational because they fear to trust what their leaders are telling them next.

For all its benefits, our political economy is rife with shortcomings, and we will never put things right until we admit this, and address such failings head on.

The second step may prove more challenging. We need to understand that our current political structures – particularly in the United States and Britain – served us well for two centuries, but are now out of date. It is sobering to reflect that they were first designed in an era when people rode horses from one end of the country to another because cars, much less aeroplanes, computers and smart phones, had not yet been invented. Is it really so surprising that one day they would need to change?

Even if it is true that corruption and skullduggery in high politics, big business and mainstream media are nothing new and that public cynicism about people in positions of authority is as old as democracy itself, new technologies ensure that it is no longer hidden from view. Citizens actually knowing – even if they don't fully understand – what is going on is not going to be a passing phase.

While most of us, not unreasonably, focus on the disruptive power of social media, it is really the group-forming capacity of digital technologies that is tearing down the old hierarchies. People can get together as never before, and they don't need mainstream media or traditional political fora to do so.

Third, once the elites have understood the necessity of the first and second steps, they will naturally recognize the need to adjust our political structures to suit the times.

The good news is that our political structures can change. And they can change because even though the democratic era as we have known it is coming to an end, it has left us with a golden legacy.

Democracy gave us a system of political values that is superior to all existing and imaginable rivals. The principles set down by the Founding Fathers of the United States are indeed self-evidently good ones.

Democracy gave us free speech. The dictatorships, by definition, will never have that, and, as a result, can never truly catch up.

Crucially, democracy gave birth to the technology that will allow democracy to renew itself. The digital revolution was not forged in China, or Russia, or North Korea. It is stamped indelibly: Made in the West.

No-one can predict precisely what the next democratic era will look like; what form our new political structures will take. But the direction of travel is clear: popular democracy powered by digital is on its way in, and representative democracy, at least in its current form, is on its way out.

Of course, there are always dangers at moments of profound historical change. We are all too aware of the dark forces that haunt our democracies, and threaten our values.

But the biggest danger of all is that today's establishment wallows in self-pity and fails to spot the opportunities that are currently being seized by demagogues and rabble-rousers.

A great realignment is taking place. Change must be embraced by those elite democrats whose immediate instinct is to fear it. If not, it will become a tyrant's revolution, not ours.

Robin Shepherd is working on a book provisionally entitled Realignment: The End of the Democratic Era As We Have Known It.

