

## **It's democracy, Jim, but not as we want it.....**

*Our Fight for Democracy:  
A History of Democracy in the United Kingdom*

John Strafford

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536 pp., notes, bibliography.

### **Anthony Frewin**

The trouble with John Strafford is that he goes just too far with democracy. I imagine that sentiment has been aired many times in the Palace of Westminster and, after a pause, it would be followed by: If he had his way everything would be democratic! Well, perish the thought. As any fule kno you can have too much democracy. It's something that has to be contained. Right? Strafford has written a detailed and immensely readable history that begins with the Romans and the Anglo-Saxons and continues the story down to the present, with later sections examining contemporary local government, the House of Lords, the European Union, even the monarchy and quangos, and other bodies.

Strafford is not an academic and this has stood him in good stead. So, rather than a dry as dust 'pol sci' approach bogged down in constitutional minutiae he confronts the subject directly with a straight-on approach that doesn't assume there was some historical dialectic that made democracy inevitable. Indeed, as he notes in an introductory chapter, 'Riot and revolution are the mother and father of democracy' and 'Our history shows that nearly all the advances towards democracy were accompanied by violence.' Whereas the view subtly promoted today to the uneducated and to the Third World when we're exporting democracy is that some sort of epiphany wakened the royalty and aristocracy of Merry England to the benefits of this system of government and, hey presto, there it was in full flower (the 'Mother of All Parliaments' nonsense that conveniently forgets, for instance, the ancient Greeks and Romans.)

Strafford recounts the major milestones in Britain's evolution of democracy such as the Magna Carta, The Great Reform Act, votes for women and so on, and always seems to come up with something new. It's a critical history and eschews the congratulatory 'how wonderful!' approach of many

writers on the subject. Let's now examine a couple of chapters that discuss specific areas.

First, the City of London. It was not reformed by the Municipal Reform Act of 1835 and, further, the business vote was abolished in 1969 in all other United Kingdom local authority elections except for the City. A special place indeed. In 2002 16,000 new business voters were created. Strafford writes:

'The principal justification put forward for the non-resident vote is that approximately 450,00 non-residents constitute the city's day-time population and use most of its services, far outnumbering the City's residents, who are only about 9,200.'

In a private Act of Parliament in 2002 reforming the voting system for electing Members to the Corporation of London, the number of non-resident voters was doubled to 32,000. Now, it's not even as if these non-resident voters can vote directly. No, they appoint a voter within their company and the number of voters elected depends on the size of the company. Strafford continues:

'Wealth should not be allowed to buy votes. This is why the business vote was abolished elsewhere and is why the business vote should be abolished in the City of London.'

He argues that the non-residents should be disenfranchised and only the residents allowed to vote; and if the objection is that the electorate is too small 'then the City should be amalgamated with a neighbouring borough or split up.'

There's a lengthy and damning analysis of the European Union (pp. 384-96) and Strafford quotes approvingly from Paul Foot's book *The Vote: How it was Won, and How it was Undermined* (2005):

'The bureaucrats who put together the Treaty of Rome in 19-56 as the foundation of a European Union were at best uninterested and at worse downright hostile to extending democracy. The affairs of the new Union were blithely put in charge of an appointed Commission, with a huge supporting bureaucracy far out of reach of any electorate. When a European Parliament was grudgingly conceded much later, the powers of its elected members were crudely subordinated to those of the unelected Commission. The MEP's power and authority went down almost as fast as their salaries and expenses went up. The European Parliament is still in effect, subservient to the unelected Commission. One result of this undemocratic structure was an almost continual Eurocorruption on a scale far more revolting ever than anything that took place in the member states.'

Strafford wittily recalls that the EU doesn't meet the democratic criteria that it demands of its members. He outlines major proposals for its reform and one

gets the impression he knows t/here'll probably have to be blood on the streets before this happens.

A recent news item highlighted the absence of democratic accountability in Brussels and here too for that matter. I'm talking about 'our Cath' or, as she is more formally known, Baroness Ashton of Upholland (somewhere in Lancashire). Our Cath was recently appointed the EU's first High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (is there a Low Representative?) on an annual salary package of £328,000 that makes her the highest paid female politician in the world and £68,000 better off than Obama, who makes a mere £260,000. So, whither our Cath? What's her story? She was the chair of the Hertfordshire Health Authority from 1998 to 2001 and also on the board of the National Council for One Parent Families. In 1999 she was made a Labour peer by the Revd. Blair who had been introduced to her by her husband Peter Kellner, the former chairman and now president of YouGov. In June 2001 she became Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in the Department for Education and Skills and in September 2004 Parliamentary Under-Secretary in the Department for Constitutional Affairs. This was followed by becoming a Privy Councillor in 2006 and Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the new Ministry of Justice in May 2007. In June 2007 Gordon Brown appointed her to the Cabinet as Leader of the House of Lords and Lord President of the Council. In October 2008 she replaced Peter Mandelson as the UK's European Commissioner in Brussels and then just over a year later the High Representative gig arrived.

A pretty meteoric rise; but at no time was she ever elected by the public for anything. She wasn't even elected High Representative by the MEPs. It was a stitch-up by EU leaders in camera.

Stafford sees this trend of appointing 'outsiders' to government as very worrying and anti-democratic, as indeed it is, and it's one that is on the increase. Take Gordon Brown. He has ennobled some ten 'outsiders' and made them ministers. These include three businessmen, a surgeon, a former head of the Royal Navy, and a sometime diplomat. All are at the heart of government, none were elected, and they are not answerable to the House of Commons. What's the House's reaction to this? The Public Administration Committee, rather than say the practice should be abolished, feebly suggests the appointees should be given 'proper scrutiny'!

So, that's democracy for you.

But the story of Cathy Ashton illustrates something else, too: the rise of political mediocrity, the ascent of the Yes-man and Yes-woman beholden to political patronage.

At the end of the book Strafford lists some 69 suggestions for More Democracy. Here's a selection:

1: Power should be devolved from central government and the higher levels of local government to the lowest practical level.

2: For all electoral purposes the City of London should be amalgamated with the City of Westminster.

3: The Regional Development Agencies should be abolished and their functions transferred to local Councils.

10: The oath of allegiance should either be abolished or it should be changed to 'I swear that I will bear true allegiance to the people, Parliament and democracy according to law.'

14: The whole House of Commons should elect Select Committee chairmen by secret ballot, thus ending de facto appointment of chairmen by the party whips.

18: The people should directly elect the Prime Minister. He could be removed by majorities in both Houses of Parliament or by referendum.

25: Our entire legal system should be disentangled from the nonsense that justice is dispensed in the name of the Queen. It should be dispensed in the name of the people.

28: The people should directly elect the House of Lords.

31: The European Council of Ministers should meet in public.

32: The European Scrutiny Committee of the House of Commons should meet in public.

39: Both the Labour Party and the Conservative Party should reform themselves to become democratic bodies answerable to their membership so that members can change the Constitution of their party on the basis of One Member One Vote.

46: Party Political Broadcasts (PPBs) should be abolished.

59: Within one month of the monarch's death a ballot should be held of all the people to endorse the successor. Should such endorsement not be given a ballot should be held on the successor's eldest child becoming monarch. Should endorsement once again not be forthcoming the monarchy would be abolished.

Some pretty radical proposals here.

Now, where would we find John Strafford? In some leafy lefty commune in the West Country? Some metropolitan think tank deemed too subversive by the major political parties? Holding the Dave Spart Chair in Radical Studies at some provincial university? No, we would find him in the Conservative Party

where he has been a member since 1964. He founded and runs the Campaign for Conservative Democracy (<http://www.copov.org.uk/> – worth a visit). And, by the way, we would also have found him, and his wife, on the 'Stop the War' march in London on 15 February 2003 holding a banner, CONSERVATIVES AGAINST THE WAR, the only such banner on the whole march.

This is a book rich in detail, analysis and comment. I can think of no better critical introduction to the subject.

Copies can be ordered directly from John Strafford at 15 North Drive, Beaconsfield, Bucks HP9 1TZ. Cheques should be made out to J. Strafford Holdings Ltd for £22.49 (includes £2.50 for shipping).