

The Limits of Democracy

Thought for the Day

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Yesterday we saw the Greek Prime Minister back off from accepting the EU plan to rescue his country from bankruptcy, and instead propose a referendum. At first glance that might seem a good thing – and where better than in Greece, the original home of democracy? After all, isn't democracy always superior to any other way of making decisions?

Well, is it? It might be a good way to make most people happy – if there are only two choices. Take a simple example: if a local council asks its citizens, "should we paint lamp-posts green or grey?" it can claim to have pleased the majority. But if it asks an open question, "What colour should we paint them?", then you can be pretty sure that no one answer will satisfy most of the voters. So what then? Choose the most popular and make most people unhappy?!

People notoriously have contradictory desires: they want the most elegant design, but also the cheapest. We want free education and health care, better roads and trains, more teachers and police – and lower taxes. We want higher pensions and lower contributions.

And what about technical questions? Could you or I have decided how to rescue the Chilean miners? So why do we think voters can decide how to rescue the Greek economy, far less the global financial system as a whole?

To come closer to home, do the campers on the steps of St Pauls and in the centres of Glasgow and Edinburgh have any more expertise than we do? For some commentators they are the personification of direct democracy – indeed taking it back to its roots in the public square of ancient Athens – while for others they are just a naïve rabble. Both views are just political hyperbole, but perhaps both have lessons to teach us: that we elect governments to lead, but that leadership requires consent; that establishing consent requires informed debate, and informed debate requires knowledge, understanding, and respect for the opinions of others.

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