

# "You mean they actually vote for the lizards?"

... "Oh yes ", said Ford with a shrug, "of course". "But", said Arthur, going for the big one again, "why?" "Because if they didn't vote for a lizard, " said Ford, "the wrong lizard might get in."<sup>1</sup>

## 1

The modern democratic state<sup>2</sup> exercises considerable power over its subjects. There is hardly any aspect of life for which no law exists. There are laws regarding the length of the working day; the number of breaks during that day; mandatory school education; how much time a pub must grant a patron for finishing her drink after the bar has closed; how a landlord has to keep and secure his tenant's deposit; what happens if someone accidentally gets injured during a football game; when a newspaper can be banned from printing a story; what may or may not be said in public; whether sex shops may put their goods on display; the illegality of dying in the Houses of Parliament; how much toxic waste is tolerable and how much punishment will be meted out if one should break its law. This state demands to decide on matters of life and death of its citizens - the latter mainly in times of war. In all this, the state allows no other power over its subjects, it insists on having the monopoly on violence. In short, this state leaves almost nothing unregulated and considers almost nothing outside of its responsibility; it demands control. It demands to be *the* ultimate force in society.

## 2

This demand stands in stark contrast to the mantra of modern democracies that 'the people' have sovereignty<sup>3</sup>. It is indeed true that every three to five years the state asks its subjects to cast a vote. In particular, the state asks its subjects, collectivised as 'the people', which representatives should be given the power to pass laws. Indirectly, the state - directed by the government - even asks who should form the next government. It is worth appreciating for a moment that this vote does not stop at some meagre local council or other lower ranks of the state. Instead, this vote in all seriousness, actuality and full colour does decide who sits in parliament<sup>4</sup> and ultimately *who* will form the government. The majority of voters - restricted by some regulations<sup>5</sup> - decide *who* will sit in that parliament which decides how long they have to finish their beer after closing and

do choose who will form that very government which decides over life and death. *This decision, the people make.*

### 3

However, taking a closer look at such an election, it becomes apparent that the voting regime or decision-making process does not grant voters all that much power at all.

- Political parties<sup>6</sup> present their political programmes to the voters. It is not the other way around<sup>7</sup>, where for instance people might tell the parties what they are most concerned about in everyday life and these parties could then propose their fixes to these issues.
- All party programmes are always complete packages of policies. A voter cannot cherry pick certain issues, goals, demands and vote for those only.
- There is no way on the ballot to tell a party why one voted for it; which points matter, which do not and which ones the voter disagrees with.
- Neither is there a way of giving only conditional support.
- After the election, MPs are not even liable for following their own programmes and promises, let alone the wishes of those who elected them.
- Fundamental conditions of life such as the economic or political system<sup>8</sup> are not balloted at all.

The act of election is a rather restricted act where no substantial content is actually *decided*. Understanding this, alleging that voters yield real sovereignty (meaning that they are in control) is plainly wrong. Instead, it makes sense to say that through the act of election parliament and government become sovereign, their power is legitimised. On the one hand, they are not bound to any mandate by the voters. On the other hand, they can and do refer to the voters' will while pursuing their agenda. If protest and unrest spreads against their policies they do not have to bow to the pressure from the streets. Instead they can point to the fact that they were elected by 'the people'. A democratic election legitimises the power of the government.

### 4

The outcome of an election is a powerful government, measured by all the things it can decide. However, its time in office is potentially ended by the next election. The institution of regular elections expresses and institutionalises a certain mistrust in the government. It expresses a certain lack of confidence that a government once in power will actually pursue the general public interest instead of mainly its own private interests. But what does general public interest mean in a society based on competition? It can hardly mean the fulfilment of individual interests of every citizen since these interests are usually in opposition. A tenant wants to live cheaply, a landlord wants high rent; a toothbrush factory wants cheap labour and cheap energy, workers want 'fair wages' and the electricity supplier 'cost-covering prices'. The only thing all competitors, in their role as competitors, share is their interest in being able to take part in competition itself; economically they want to compete, because they have to. The state makes sure of this through its guarantee of private property. First of all, everyone is excluded from the things they need. On the other hand, since all material wealth, including that stuff others need, is in the hands of private owners; one's own property becomes the means to get access to someone else's property; that is, through the act of exchange. Thus, private property is both the exclusion from material wealth and the only means to overcome this exclusion, making everybody dependent on it. This founds an

interest in the conditions of competition, the only means available to the subjects. In the name of this general public interest all private interests must be restricted. This applies to politicians as well. A corrupt politician is elected despite him being corrupt, not because of it. Being crooked is an obstacle in the proper carrying out of a job which is about the facilitation of the general public interest. The ideal politician is one who does not think about himself<sup>9</sup>, his friends or colleagues. The ideal politician is of an exemplary moral character. It is a rather frightening idea in the heads of bourgeois subjects that their immediate competitor might one day seize state power and use this power to further his own private agenda. Correspondingly, all big parties express their will to further the general public interest and stress that in their respective programmes. No successful party in the UK only caters to the special interests of a particular social group. The times of a workers' party are over. New Labour's victory in 1997 was an expression of this opening and now the Conservatives are aiming for the same broad appeal. Even fringe left-wing parties like Respect do to the dictates of 'realism' and respect private property through their demands of "taxation on the big corporations and the wealthy to fund public services"<sup>10</sup> - a demand which requires big corporations to make the kind of profits which can then be taxed. A taxation that was too aggressive would threaten the government's revenue and thus its means to fund the NHS, pensions and decent housing. The common feature of all these political parties is their affirmation of the basic principles of the capitalist economy<sup>11</sup>. All democratic parties want the democratic state which uses and fosters the accumulation of capital as the basis of its power. They even seek to steer it.

## 5

It is a prerequisite for the legitimacy of any government that both the voters and defeated parties accept its victory after the election. This might seem self-evident at first and thus this fact is only recognised when it is violated. For example, the legitimacy of George W. Bush's first term in office was somewhat tattered after a series of re-countings and bans of re-countings of votes in the state of Florida. For another more severe example we can turn to Iran where the opposition claims to have won the election despite the official announcement to the contrary. These disagreements can mark the transition into civil war. On the other hand, a successful election draws the people and the state together. This is necessary because during session the opposition between citizens and the government is plainly visible and reinforced: The government's job is to restrict or negate the interests of its citizens in the general public interest. The pledge of allegiance to the state enacted by voting maintains and makes feasible the contradiction between compulsion and consent<sup>12</sup>. Through the choice of the personnel of domination, domination itself does not appear as such but instead is recognised as a service provided to the voters.

## 6

A successful election accomplishes more than a formal consent to domination. It is important for the overall working of the state that the ideology of the voters matches the programmes of the government to some extent. A fundamental opposition between citizenry and state could undermine the governments power to implement its schemes and programmes, it could threaten the basis on which both the legitimacy and the power of the government is built. This reinforcement of ideology is partly accomplished by the political education provided during election campaigns. Running up to an election the voters are asked to leave their personal perspective behind and instead take on a bird's eye view. While most consumers of newspapers do

this on a regular basis, during the election campaigns everybody is encouraged to take on this perspective even more. The voter is introduced to and presented with the necessities of the state. Political parties present 'inherent necessities' not as their own deed but as a 'reality' which confronts themselves just as well: in times of crisis banks must be stabilised, growth must be restarted, the deficit may not grow 'too large', the health care system must be reformed etc. Anyone from welfare recipient to banker is encouraged to not worry about the next paycheck for a while. But instead everybody is encouraged to ponder how to decrease the deficit and other such things. Of course, it is relatively unlikely that any creative idea from the minds of an ordinary voter would ever be implemented, but a likely outcome is at least an agreement on what the pressing issues are. Indeed, a managing of these necessities is a prerequisite for everyone being able to realise their own private interests such as receiving the next paycheck. Since there are many mutually exclusive interests, each voter is encouraged to consider 'fair' solutions to these problems. A good politician - one of the kind voters put in office - has to continuously balance interests and carefully restrict private interests in the name of the general public interest.

## 7

Even for the disgruntled there are political parties available to vote for: the opposition. On the one hand, they blame the government for not exercising its control properly. They deny the expertise of the current government to tackle the issues facing the nation. Usually, this remains somewhat vague in order to attract diffuse discontent. The Tories follow this strategy at the moment. On the other hand, they criticise the government for its policies and claims that with their own alternative programmes the problems they have identified would not occur. Left-wing parties for instance claim that mass poverty was unnecessary and within capitalism the problem could be solved quickly once they were in power and could tax the rich appropriately. Thus poverty was not a necessity of the mode of production which the state fosters for its own sake. Instead poverty was an unnecessary result of the wrong people in management. Democratic opposition directs critique to its decent content. That is, a content which is supportive of the state. It is an invitation to the voter to solve her problem with politics by replacing the politicians. The common anti-critical statement 'if you do not vote you cannot complain' expresses this demand for subordination rather clearly. According to this it is beyond consideration that the election itself might be subject to critique.

## 8

A successful election, both with respect to its formal act and its political content, requires voters who worry about such things. A person who considers an election to be an adequate expression of his political actions wants a strong government which is capable of acting, regardless of how it is composed and what it does. That person considers the existence of a government as a prerequisite for carrying out his own interests. That voter accepts the outcome of an election, even if it does not correspond to his choice. He would accept David Cameron as 'our prime minister' even if he did not vote for him. Such persons more often than not accept austerity measures imposed by a government even though it worsens their livelihood. This ideology which wants 'effective governance' meets its adequate match in the public obsession with the character of politicians. If no question of substance is actually left to the voter, when all she can choose is a candidate who is not liable, when someone is to be elected to facilitate the general public interest in a society based on competition, when the outcome of this election must be a strong government, *then* the question of what kind of person gets elected does indeed become relevant. Thus, the outcry

about the apolitical voters who care more about gossip than proper politics is unfounded. This interest in politics is the kind of interest this political system asks from its subjects.

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## Footnotes

1 Douglas Adams. So long, and thanks for all the fish. Chapter 36. 1984

2 Arguing about democratic elections and illustrating these arguments with a country which is quite explicit about not being a genuine democracy is a bit difficult. For clarity of presentation, we will develop the main arguments with respect to straight-forward democracies in the main text and discuss differences in the UK in footnotes. Also, the constitution in the UK is uncodified which complicates the presentation to some extent. The resulting differences are not that fundamental in practice, but are noteworthy when talking about the legal ideal.

3 In the UK the Queen or King - not 'the people' - has sovereignty.

4 Only the House of Commons in the UK. The House of Lords is appointed.

5 County borders, electoral systems, minimum percentage hurdles ...

6 Some countries have political systems which put more emphasis on political parties while others put more emphasis on the individual candidates. In Germany political parties are provided with special care and protection. For example, only the Supreme Court can ban a party. It did exercise this right twice. First, by banning a party for continuation of the nation-socialist NSDAP and second in 1956 when the Communist Party was banned. This ban in principle includes all communist parties founded afterwards. However, since the 1970s communist parties were allowed to exist again in order to improve relations with the East.

7 To avoid a misunderstanding: pointing out how something would be the other way around does not imply partiality.

8 The absoluteness of the political system is expressed in the statement that "no Parliament can pass laws that future Parliaments cannot change" (<http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/laws/sovereignty.cfm>). Certainly, any law which would strip the right from the parliament to make such laws on behalf of 'the people' would violate this statement. Democracy itself is not decided on by a ballot.

9 The outrage about a bunch of MPs claiming expenses on second and third homes is a good illustration of this ideal. For the budget these claims do not matter much, what caused the outrage was the lack of standards and 'character' exercised by these 'role models'.

10 Respect Manifesto (<http://www.therespectparty.net/manifesto.php>)

11 The Socialist Party of Great Britain is a notable exception to this rule. The SPGB "claims that there can be no state in a socialist society" and "that socialism will, and must, be a wageless, moneyless, worldwide society of common (not state) ownership". The SPGB "seeks election to facilitate the elimination of capitalism by the vast majority of socialists, not to govern capitalism." (<http://www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/differences.html>) Leaving aside for the moment of whether this is a good strategy or not, it is clear from their party programme that the SPGB does not affirm the basic principles of the capitalist economy.

12 "When people put their ballots in the boxes, they are, by that act, inoculated against the feeling that the government is not theirs. They then accept, in some measure, that its errors are their errors, its aberrations their aberrations, that any revolt will be against them. It's a remarkably shrewd and rather conservative arrangement when one thinks of it." - John Kenneth Galbraith, The Age of Uncertainty (1977), Ch. 12, p. 330