

THEIR RIGHTS AND OURS.

One of the key questions to ask is why the capitalist classes eventually opened their Parliaments to working class representation over a century ago. Was it necessity or opportunism? And has the balance sheet of opening been positive for their rule?

All rulers have two choices when exploiting another class. They can choose coercion or co-operation, the bullet or the ballot, though sometimes the decision is not theirs to make. As capitalism developed two things emerged making this choice starker and harder to avoid. First production became more complex, and workers turned from the minority class in society into by far the majority. This latter development with its political movements and pressures, brought the above question to the fore.

The best country to examine this process was Britain. By the 19th Century it was the richest country and had become the dominant global Empire. Industry developed fastest in Britain after the Industrial Revolution creating a settled urban working class and stratifying it (important). And for these reasons, as well as being surrounded by sea, it was the most stable political country, but one latent with potential conflicts because of the rapid transformation of its society.

The British ruling class did not throw open the doors of Parliament to the working class and invite them in all at once. Instead, it evolved over 100 years from 1832 and the Reform Act of that year, to 1928 when all women were given the right to vote. [The First Reform Act of 1832](#) increased the vote by 217,000 or fifty percent by extending it to the labour aristocracy, the skilled workers who owned £10 worth of property. Those were the conservative workers sandwiched between the bosses and lower skilled workers in a working environment continuously under threat of being deskilled. The right to vote was confined to men only and now included one in ten male adults. Furthermore, this Act also made each vote more consequential by re-organising constituencies diminishing the South and the nobility.

The first reform act followed a period of turbulence including the Peterloo Massacre, unrest in Bristol and the widespread 1831 riots due to a failure to pass the first Reform Act in that year. It was designed to divide the emerging working class by co-opting its upper layers whose skills made them more essential to production.

The first reform act did not stop the pressure for extending the franchise. In 1864, the National Reform Union was formed and in that same year the more radical and broader based Reform League came into being composed of trade unionists, socialists and Chartists whose movement had petered out by 1857. It campaigned for universal male suffrage and a secret ballot. The League was instrumental in organising the winter of discontent in 1866/7. As a result of this pressure the 1867 Act added one million voters instead of the 1866 version which would have only added 400,000. The act entitled 30% of the adult male population to vote and if we factor for geography, a much higher proportion of the urban adult male population including most male heads of households. But it still excluded the semi and unskilled proletariat which the ruling class considered feckless and untrustworthy.

The 1884 or Third Reform Act extended the provision of the earlier Act to the countryside. It added another 2 million voters because a third of the population was still rural. Now 60% of all adult males were included, including miners as mining villages were outside the boroughs to which voting had previously been confined. Not all the bourgeoisie welcomed this extension fearing for the first time

that they could be a minority in Parliament. However, their backstop was the House of Lords which had the right to veto parliamentary legislation until this right was reversed in 1909.

But by then the tide had become unstoppable. The emergence of the general trade unions embracing less skilled workers of both sexes gave rise to a political movement culminating in the Labour Party at the turn of the 20th Century. By then the suffragette movement had emerged campaigning for the vote to be extended to women. All of this was invigorated by the Russian Revolution. Finally, and later than many other countries, for example New Zealand, a colony, which had introduced it in 1893, universal suffrage finally arrived in Britain in 1928.

As the working class grew in strength and confidence towards the end of the 19th Century, the ruling class changed direction, it started looking outside parliament towards the emerging labour leadership to secure its rule. These leaders were thrown up by the growth of the defensive organs of the working class, primarily the trade unions, which by 1868, a year after the second Reform Act and the legalisation of unions, were sufficient in number to form a federation of unions, the TUC.

A minority can only lead a majority by cultivating agents and allies within the majority. These allies must satisfy four requirements. Firstly, they must be distinct, really a caste. They must have influence. They must have something to protect which can be taken away. And because of their circumstance they recognise the virtues of negotiating rather than rebelling.

The labour bureaucracy fitted the bill. The new organs of the working class not only defended workers, but through dues, full-time officials and permanent staff came into being. Gradually, they elevated themselves above the general conditions of their members and into proximity of the bosses who through flattery and threat cultivated then coopted this crystalising labour bureaucracy.

These bureaucrats understood that their privileges were based on the preservation of their organisations, the source of their funding. To preserve this income, by degrees, they changed the trajectory of these organisations from one seeking fundamental change into one organised for negotiation and compromise. Fundamental change would bring down the wrath of the ruling class jeopardising their position, while negotiation would allow for common ground to emerge between employee and employer reinforcing their role. Thus, revolution gave way to the culture of reform.

The labour bureaucracy was the engineering strut which modernised, stabilised and strengthened the structure of the capitalist state because the working class was now represented in the state although by class traitors. The capitalists now had the luxury of dealing with the working class directly and indirectly, directly using the repressive elements of the state to temper working class demands, and indirectly, via the leaders of the Labour Party and Trade Unions to undermine and misdirect these demands and the struggles around them.

And so, rule by consent became possible. Apparently, workers now had a stake in society though they had to continuously defend it. Co-operation for the most part replaced coercion. And to fully exploit an increasingly complex and sophisticated economy that cooperation was needed. Had coercion taken over, resentment would have replaced collaboration, and revolution rather than reform would have continued to hover in the background. A disgruntled and dissatisfied working-class does not make for productive working class and it puts at risk the expensive machinery and equipment they work with. Employers had long ago learnt the economic advantage of a co-operative work force who needed only the light touch of the whip of unemployment to keep them in place.

But as we shall see, rule by consent is a hungry beast which needs to be fed continuously with incremental concessions and improvements in living standards. Enter the era of neo-liberalism which arrived with the collapse of the global rate of profit in the early 1970s. The previous post war-social democracy era had now become unaffordable, the period where profits and wages grew together. Now profits could only grow at the expense of wages for reasons which do not concern us here. As a result, restrictions on the rule of capital had to be broken, the market had to be freed up, and redistribution reversed to increase inequality rather than reduce it.

But to free the market the rest of society had to be imprisoned. The rule of capital became harsher, protections fewer, support thinner while precariousness expanded. Instead of concessions, cuts became the norm as austerity replaced prosperity ensuring each successive generation ended up poorer than their parents. Under this pressure parliamentary democracy began to unravel. Traditional parties become discredited, voters disenchanted, the tweedle dee and tweedle dumb electoral options no longer attractive. While millions fought for the right vote a hundred and fifty years ago, many dying and injured in the cause of that fight, now millions can't be bothered to vote.

In response to this electoral crisis and behind the backs of their workers, the ruling class has begun to sharpen the tools of coercion and repression which they had never set aside but kept in reserve.

Parliamentary Democracy.

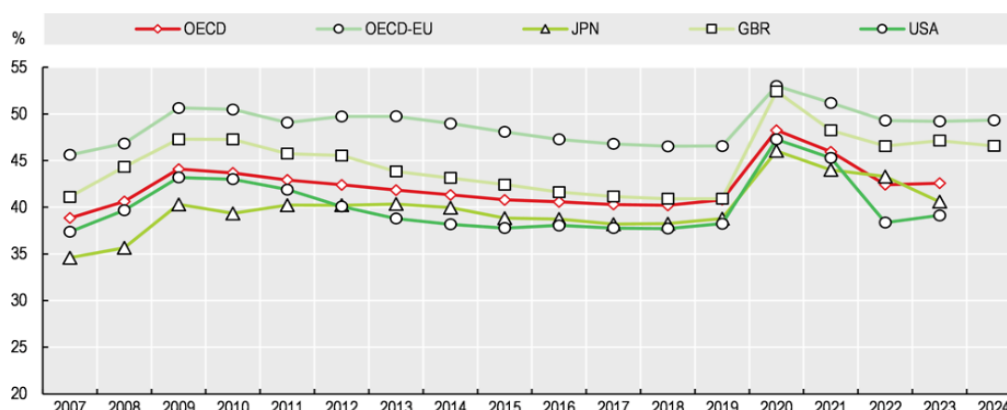
There are two fundamental flaws with Parliamentary Democracy. The first is that no MP can be held accountable nor charged for any decision or vote made in Parliament. They can only be charged for common law offences, such as murder, assault, theft, fraud and so on. Thus, if an MP kills someone they will be charged with murder but if they vote for austerity and cuts which will kill tens of thousands of the most vulnerable, they walk free. Therefore, when Reform talk about their *Contract with the Voters*, which they declare is stronger than a Manifesto, they are talking out of their derriere because they know full well the voters cannot take them to court for breaking their contract, nor are they personally liable for damages should they break this contract. In other words, becoming a typical MP always comes with a get-out-of-jail-card.

That is by design not neglect. The capitalists know that nobody in their right mind would stand for parliament if they were held to account for their actions. The capitalists know that if they are to use politicians for their own ends and against the voters, they must grant them immunity. That is why Parliament is such a sham, no more than a braying circus littered with broken promises and reeking of corruption.

The second is the limits of parliament. Parliament does not determine who gets a job, how much they will be paid, how hard they must work, nor what will be produced, nor the price at which these things will be sold, or how much profits the capitalist class is entitled to. True, in some countries Parliament does act against excesses. The length of the working day or week, the pension age, health and safety at work, some consumer protection against dangerous products other than social media it seems, sick pay, paternity and maternity leave, holiday pay and so on. But this is legislation just smoothing the margins. And it is true that despite the best efforts of the neo-liberals and their lobbyists, remnants of the welfare state still exist. [Government spending](#) as a share of GDP has fallen since the Financial Crash of 2008 but is still substantial given the disproportions between worker and capitalist, with the working class comprising over 80% of society, setting limits on these cuts.

Graph 1.

Figure 15.2. General government expenditures as a percentage of GDP, 2007 to 2024



However, these public expenditure figures are always overstated, because they include expenditures which benefit the capitalist class. A better way of looking at the matter is to examine transfer payments from the government to recipients such as pensioners, those on benefits, social care, childcare provisions etc all of which form part of the standard of living of the working population. [The OECD calls this Social Protection](#). When viewed this way the average OECD public expenditure amounting to 43% reduces to 23%. Thus, the average government capture of the value produced by workers and then returned directly back to workers who are unemployed, sick, disabled, retired etc, amounts to less than a quarter of the total value produced.

Much of the rest of the value remains captured and controlled by the capitalist class in one form or another prior to its division into profits and wages, unsupervised by Parliament. Thus, Parliament's economic clout is lower than is often assumed. Here then sharply revealed is the difference between bourgeois rights and workers' rights, between universal rights and class rights which include the economic.

Parliament does not question or correct why society should be split on class lines - on the one side empowered capital, and on the other, disempowered labour. Why over 80% of society should be working for less than 5% of society. All Parliament does is to extend the rights enjoyed by the capitalist class to the working class. It treats society as commodity owners, on the one side the buyers of labour power and on the other the owners and sellers of labour power, while posing as the neutral arbiter between them, which makes it appear that the state is untouched by classes.

But here is the rub. The real power of the ruling class, their social power, emerges from their private ownership of the means of production, distribution and information. This is the source of their money and influence. It does not flow directly from their political power, which is why they can share political power, or what is the same thing, tolerate multi-party democracy. But what they will not allow is the use of parliamentary democracy to challenge their private ownership of the means of life.

There is no *Parliamentary Road to Socialism*. Our rulers will not allow an *Enabling Act* which allows Parliament to dispossess them. When threatened by this, they will fold up the parliamentary tent, send all the MPs home and declare a state of emergency by abolishing the rule of law. They will then substitute the bullet for the ballot.

The alternative.

In a society where a minority rules a majority all democratic institutions will necessarily be limited, superficial and fraught. Only when the majority seize power and become the ruling class, and in doing so abolish classes, will democratic institutions be truly democratic and reflect the interests of society. Only then can the representatives found in these bodies be held to account, made responsible for the actions, not enjoy any immunities. They will stand or fall by their decisions and actions because they will no longer be tools of a hostile class nor protected by them.

But there is more. Workers' rights are not only political, they are primarily economic, and they are found not inside the democratic institutions but outside them in production and distribution. The very spaces barred to them by capitalism and avoided by Parliaments. The right to receive in proportion to contribution is the foremost right, the one which abolishes unpaid labour (the source of profits), and which has become criminalised in any case. This contribution is formalised politically but actualised by calculation based on intensity, skill and productivity, not by laws. Similarly, the right to a job becomes real, because as collective owners we have all become employers not employees. Similarly, what to produce is not decided in political institutions but arrives when billions of individual choices made by individual workers are compiled by the planners under the banner; 'workers give of their labour and are rewarded by the choice of their product.' Similarly, how fast to produce is not decided by the planners but by bodies of workers who now control production. Similarly, the prices at which products circulate is not determined politically but by weighted average labour times, with the fall in these prices due to rising productivity becoming the reward for collective labour.

Here is the summary found in [my programme](#): *"Falling prices which rewards collective effort, the right to receive in proportion to contribution which rewards individual effort, consumer led planning which rewards the expenditure of labour, workers control of production and the right of every producer to decide on the deductions from the social product, form an indissoluble whole. "That is our future. The important point is this, class consciousness means we no longer think narrowly but expansively. Rights are no longer confined to the political sphere but extend into the economic sphere, a sphere previously monopolised by the capitalist class and denied to the majority.*

In the present system, each vote, each parliamentary and council election, appears to hurt rather than help the voter and has done so for some time. We live in a time where austerity haunts, where wars rage and the planet burns. Where voters have become disenchanted with their traditional parties because of broken pledges. Where the burden of supporting a reckless and incompetent ruling class and its results, weighs more heavily on the backs of society.

It is a time of change, of history accelerating, of parties being discredited more quickly, of impatience and division, characterised by urgency. All that is lacking is the confidence that we can build a future in the form of a *caring-sharing* society. Yes, it is a time of idealism, but idealism firmly rooted in theory, based on a profound understanding of the present state of things, and therefore of the possibilities and necessities lodged within them.

Workers of the world unite; you have a world to save. You are the future; the capitalists are the past.

Brian Green, 18th September 2026.