

## Notes from the Radlett and District U3A Philosophy Group Meeting held on 21st April 2016

**Subject: - Plato and Political Justice**

**Using “The Philosopher’s Book of Questions and Answers” by D E Wittkower page 71.**

Previously we had been asked to think about the following questions:-

*Running for political office is a disruptive, difficult, expensive process. How much do you think politicians are motivated by idealism, and how much by the desire for control?*

*There are a great many people-economists, policy analysts, scholars of poverty etc. – who are experts on issues of great concern for the nation. Why are they not in office?*

*What kind of people do you want in office and how could we get them there? Why would they be more effective than those currently in office?*

### **Current politicians**

Some members of the group felt that many politicians had gone into politics for the right reasons, but, as power corrupts everywhere in the world, had now lost sight of their original objectives. Others thought that most politicians are probably honest and some MPs are genuinely concerned about specific issues. Many felt that politicians have little experience of ordinary life as they go into politics straight from university.

### **Getting the right people**

It was suggested that the standard of candidates depends on those putting themselves forward for office and those on the selection panel. Many felt that candidates should have worked in industry or a profession before going into politics. The difficulty of identifying those who will make good politicians, before they are in power was raised. Some felt that there is a strong link between power and knowledge, with leaders needing to be aware of what is going on and be good at delegation. Our system of voting was discussed with some favouring proportional representation, but other suggested that it doesn’t work in big countries as it produces little change. Many felt that we get the politicians we deserve as we tend to vote against rather than for, with the majority voting along party lines. Some felt that the current situation is so dreadful that it’s hard to see how it can be dealt with, but others suggested that we shouldn’t be pessimistic; it has been the same throughout human kind.

### **Getting the information we need to make the right choices**

It was suggested that it is difficult to get proper information to form an opinion, when we can’t trust the papers. Some felt that they didn’t have enough information to vote. Others felt that the onus is on us to find out about candidate’s views and backgrounds, using the internet and going to public meetings, then to question the candidates.

Some group members had found that MPs do read and respond to letters and are informative at surgeries and meetings. It was pointed out that, if a petition gets 10,000 signatures, the government will respond.

It was felt that only a very small percent think about politics and it was even suggested that the young don’t think about things deeply. It appeared that the problem boiled down to one thing – apathy.

## **Types of government**

It is suggested that it is safer for the country if we vote in moderate, middle of the road politicians, rather than having extremists. However Aneurin Bevan was quoted as saying “We know what happens to people who stay in the middle of the road. They get run over.” The fact that there are elections 5 years was thought to be beneficial.

Some said that we are fortunate to live in a democracy; others asked “is democracy the best way to govern?” Many thought that, though there are faults, yet we don’t seem to be able to find a better system of government.

Kant believed that republics which trade with each other would be unlikely to go to war.

The introduction of democracy into the Middle East was described as a disaster.

A benevolent dictatorship was suggested as the ideal.

Plato used the Ship of State analogy to ask who should take the helm – those who believe they know best, those that seek to control, or the stargazer who isn’t interested in power or control but can navigate using the stars? He claimed that the philosophers should rule. He also said “Those that seek power don’t deserve it; those that deserve it don’t seek it.”

Our facilitator Christopher said that Anja Steinbauer has suggested that ruling is a skill and she asks “Is it rational to leave the exercise of a skill to experts?” She goes on to say that “The people are not experts (in ruling). Yet in a democracy the people rule.” This suggests that democracy is imperfect yet the group felt that the argument had flaws, questioning whether ruling is a skill or an art, whether experts are the best decision makers and if there should not be apprentices learning the skills. The model suggests an elite government removed from the people.

## **Local issues**

The Newberries development was given as an example of the council using the sale of public land to cover the budget shortages, caused by its reluctance to consult the people on a council tax rise.

## **Who should vote?**

It was suggested that now the ordinary man in the street can go into politics, we are all represented. However, although it is not yet a hundred years since universal suffrage when the working man and women over 30 got the vote, some asked what would happen if only tax payers had the right to vote and suggested a means test for people to be allowed to vote. Others asked who would select those allowed to vote.

## **Rights and Responsibilities**

The importance of free speech was stressed.

Rawls analysed justice in terms of maximum equal liberty regarding basic rights and duties for all members of society.

JFK said “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.”

Lao Tzu said “The wicked leader is he who the people despise. The good leader is he who the people revere. The great leader is he who the people say, 'We did it ourselves.'”