

Chiltern U3A 'Political Thinking'

Meeting No 30 Monday 16th Sept 2019

Topic; Brexit - the current impasse, conflicting will of the people, conflict over MPs failing to vote with their party, and discussion of the nature of democracy

Summary

The discussion concentrated on recent events in connection with Brexit that may have long term significance. There was general agreement that the current impasse is caused by the impossibility of compromise; disappointingly it was noted there is no general consideration now of the pro and cons of the issue itself. The expression of the will of the people by referendum continues in conflict with the alternative expression of the same, the majority vote in Parliament; the view that Parliament is supreme did not command total support in the group. The removal of the whip from some 22 Conservative MPs who did not support their party may be undeserved or otherwise unfair, or not; again there was support for both sides. As to the nature of democracy the topic stimulated a wide-ranging group discussion that covered most aspects of modern life underlying the central importance of democratic ideals in modern society.

Discussion

Like the country the group is approximately evenly divided between Leavers and Remainers, and no middle ground. Partly this is the nature of the question, there is no in between position. Mostly opinion is more emotional than rational. Identification of pros and cons and evaluation of their relative importance (which is usually one way of reaching a decision where there is a choice) is not effective, as it would seem there is little agreement as to what are the pros or cons, and even less as to their relative significance. So each side sticks with its opinion. Only the perceived wrong of the failure to implement the decision or the anticipated adverse consequences of actually doing so are discussed. There was general agreement that this is a reasonable description of the current impasse.

The conflict between the two expressions of the will of the people was recognised by our group. But there was a solid view that there is some moral imperative on MPs to accept the referendum result as a form of instruction, whatever the individual MP's own views. There was similar support for the view that MPs are bound to make up their own minds and vote accordingly. The point of an elector having a representative in Parliament, the MP, is that the MP has better information to make a better decision than the elector himself. That the referendum result was

heavily influenced by false promises was accepted and the role of MPs in standing against this was approved of, by some.

Group opinion was again divided on the question of MPs voting against their own party. Long periods of previous support, adherence to Conservative values, and service to the party should be taken into account and offset an occasional infidelity. Previous instances of others who rebelled but were left unpunished led to suggestions of unfairness. On the other hand MPs who belong to a political party vote with their party to enact government policy if their party is in government, and vote with their party in Opposition to offer an alternative. That is the system. That is what electors expect.

The final topic, the nature of democracy itself, stimulated many ideas.

Much of the discussion was around minorities. That a decision in democracy should be made by majority vote was accepted, but the difficulty of how to recognise and take account of a minority view was recognised. The first past the post electoral system in the UK ignores minorities and consequently cannot be particularly democratic.

The doctrine of separation of powers, where Judiciary, Legislature and Executive are different organisations is a tenet of the constitution of the USA, and of other democracies. The practice in the UK where the Legislature and Executive are very closely intertwined - mostly the Executive controls the Legislature- was considered as not particularly democratic.

The rights of minorities means equal treatment before the law, but could not in general extend to the right of a minority to a different legal system.

In respect of religion, there was a democratic right to freedom of religion; but if minority religious practices or observances had impact on others who were not members of the minority then these should be curtailed.

However there was support for the view that living in a country meant accepting the culture, language, norms etc of the country; and that these should prevail.

Another key feature of democracy was the concept of limit to the duration of powers. Some felt that every political office should be of limited period of tenure for an individual. Whether this should apply to the Monarchy? Perhaps now an apolitical office!