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## *From Democracy to Hyperdemocracy*

**William D. Gairdner**

Some years ago I began to notice that, during question periods following public speeches, otherwise rational human beings who were clearly arguing for opposing points of view were increasingly inclined to cite “democracy” in defence of their positions. This was disturbing because it was obvious that this venerable word was only being introduced to shut off debate prematurely. The clear intention was to make it impossible for opponents to reject a claim without also rejecting democracy—a grievous heresy nowadays.

*A cheapened  
concept of  
democracy.*

So there it was. Before my very eyes “democracy” was becoming a word of ill-repute—a term picked up and used vigorously for the advantages of the moment, then dropped without further consideration. I soon began to wonder how this cheapening of the word might be linked to the cheapening of the underlying concept, and how this in turn might be connected to another question—namely, why do we Westerners, who have historically celebrated a self-reliant individualism within our local communities and just as defiantly deplored state collectivism, now celebrate both of these things in a new and paradoxical form of democracy that someone has aptly described as “libertarian socialism”? This is a very recent conception of democracy, barely a half century old, under which individuals have come to believe that they have all the rights and states have all the duties.

What has struck this writer is that, despite its inherent contradictions, this arguably anti-democratic form has not only become widely accepted as normal, but the radicals who have worked so hard to bring this acceptance about did so in something best de-

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scribed as the “language of democracy.” This language has four key terms: “freedom,” “equality,” “rights,” and “choice”—which become insidious whenever they are emptied of all traditional content and limitation.<sup>1</sup> Once pried loose from their history, so to speak, these four words easily become serviceable for political radicals who use them to form a kind of camouflage or code that must be deciphered carefully before we have any hope of understanding what is being attempted, as distinct from what is being expressed.

The contradictions inherent in the term “libertarian socialism” alone tell us that we are living vulnerably in an intellectually confused time, for a people undisturbed by the manifest incoherence of its own political philosophy is obviously ripe for manipulation. For example, it no longer makes sense to use the terms “democracy” and “freedom” interchangeably, as we have always done. When people felt strong in their communities, were more fiercely independent, and even longed to be free of overbearing government, the two words seemed the same because people thought it natural to use the former to acquire and defend the latter. But the words are used quite differently now. Although ostensibly a free people, we tend to use the word “democracy” for the opposite reason: to demand increased government services, security, and regulation as a right. But this ultimately turns democracy against freedom because every tax, service, and regulation constitutes some kind of limit on our personal action and responsibility. For this reason it is time to separate the terms and determine their true nature.

*“Democracy”  
and “freedom”  
no longer  
synonymous.*

Once we do this, what becomes immediately apparent is that democratic instruments turn into value-neutral tools used to decide the distribution of policy and power. Just as a shovel can be used to dig a foundation for a house, or to beat someone to death, the tools, and especially the language, of democracy can be used to create a virtuous, free, and good society or an oppressive and very bad one. In quiet moments I worry that we North Americans

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<sup>1</sup> For example, our ancient body of common law limits free speech through slander and libel provisions; society is laced with rational inequalities such as different laws and standards for different ages, genders, and abilities; the rights of some are always limited by the obligations they impose on society; and all choices are vigorously limited and constrained by laws, customs, and the rights of others.

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have been flirting with the latter category for some time, and that the refinement and vigour of any society have little to do with democracy, or with the act of digging, and everything to do with the underlying moral and political culture, or what is dug. This is merely to restate a warning from the powerfully insightful thinker Irving Babbitt, who, early in the last century in his book *Democracy and Leadership*, warned that civilization can only be created by an act of the will, but if we decide to let it drift, the direction is inevitably downward.

When it comes to directing civilization, there are only two mutually incompatible methods available. You must use either unbounded state power or the voluntary authority of civil society working in cooperation with strictly limited, constitutional government. In other words, you can shape a country by using unaccountable force as deployed through the agencies of the state or by using the myriad indirect moral and social forces that are to be found naturally in the various spontaneous groupings of civil society. But you cannot successfully use both, because unlimited government and the autonomous institutions of civil society rest on opposing principles. The unlimited state must control, but civil society must be free to self-regulate and accordingly may easily undermine the power and control of the state at any time. That is why all centralizing states, although they may pay lip-service to the grandeur of a free society, inevitably engage it in a struggle for control.

Nevertheless, even though these two options are so clearly different in character and consequence, they are very easily confused. The real-world meaning of the difference between them hits home most deeply when we learn that in the dreadful twentieth century nearly three times as many citizens were killed by their own governments as the number of military deaths in all of that century's terrible wars. This is simply astonishing, and it tells us that, although governments may routinely nourish and protect their citizens, they may just as routinely kill them for what outsiders consider very flimsy reasons.

Social groups, however, present no such mortal danger. They must rely on persuasion and on moral reward and stigma to get their way. The state may order you to pay unreasonable taxes, jail you for activism, or hang you for crimes. But it is simply unimaginable for any agency of civil society even to hint at such actions.

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Access to coercive legal power is the decisive factor, and today neither the church, the family, nor any other voluntarily formed organization of civil society has such access.

Still, it is generally known that, even though our parents, teachers, minister, boss, team captain, and so on, cannot jail us if we disobey them, we nevertheless may find ourselves in painful moral or social handcuffs for doing so. This sort of omnipresent authority, to which most of us happily subscribe as members of particular communities, is held over us in varying degrees most of our lives. We may be compelled by external force to obey raw power; but we compel ourselves by an inner impulse or law to obey authority. Coercive law and the intrinsic moral authority of society are very different. The first is a force we cannot resist and keep our freedom, the second a force to which we give ongoing assent or refusal and then live with the consequences.

In the past, the difference between power and persuasion was obvious to everyone. But in our modern embrace of indiscriminate liberty this distinction has been lost, with the result that today our tendency is to think of all forms of authority as equally oppressive and capable of generating the same emotional temperature. This confusion has a very unhappy result because it supplies restless political radicals who purport to defend the public interest with an endless array of complaints against even the common moral and social bonds that the vast majority accept and support. Such radicals do not see that to destroy such bonds is to destroy the people's best defence against state power, and this is most harmful of all. For history shows repeatedly that the moment states sense resistance from entire communities, they tend at first to back away. Then, they aggressively seek to reorganize civil society in a way that will slowly transfer the allegiance and dependency that individuals feel for society to the state itself. In a sense, states outbid society for the allegiance of its members—with the members' own money. In modern states, this has resulted in a slow but relentless decomposition or atomization of society. When this is done for explicit ideological reasons, the transformation may be achieved extremely quickly, as has been the case with Sweden and Canada. When it is done primarily for reasons of bureaucratic efficiency or when the political climate at the top is increasingly radical but the constitutional configuration on which government operates is fragmented, as under American federalism, then the

*States outbid  
civil society  
for allegiance  
of its members.*

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transformation is much slower, but in the end just as destructive of civil society.

It happens that the left has always understood the difference between these two methods for establishing a political order, and it always seeks to use the more powerful state as a proxy for its will, against which it tolerates no opposition from what it sees—quite correctly—as directly competitive forms of social, religious, and family authority. These it naturally seeks to dilute, eliminate, or replace as it sets about transferring citizen allegiance to more comforting and secure government programs and services. In this respect, the naïve motive of simple bureaucratic efficiency and centralization for reasons of ideological purity may dovetail powerfully.

Conservatives, in contrast, have generally abhorred overweening government while welcoming social and moral authority in all its customary and traditional forms. That is because conservatives traditionally have valued a free but binding civil order over the coercive orderings of the state. Foremost among the many institutions they have esteemed and defended are religion and the family, and everything associated with them. Aside from the true conservative's personal interest in these institutions, he is also aware that they serve as inexpensive—and importantly, non-coercive—forms of crowd control. The result of these very different perceptions and preferences is that, in their strategic effort to repulse the left's persistent reaching for state power, conservatives historically have sought to fortify the many alternative forms of social and moral authority that are natural to human communities.

And this is where the confusion begins. For many who call themselves conservatives today do so merely because they happen to favour free markets. However, it doesn't take long to see that this sort of conservative usually has very little interest in—and may even openly disdain—the natural forms of civil authority. In this respect he is more like a modern liberal or a libertarian. To convey this distinction, such people sometimes call themselves "fiscal" conservatives to indicate that they will fight for freedom in the economic arena but that they believe all moral and social matters "should be left up to the individual." In other words, along with their modern liberal counterparts they embrace all the ideals of the autonomous, freely choosing individual, and only

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part company with liberalism when it favours the broad use of state powers to correct society or to make things artificially equal. Simply put, these conservatives want the state to stay out of all transactions of private life, especially economic ones, and they proudly imagine their “free-market individualism” to be the best argument and defence against state power.

Alas, it has turned out to be the worst. For society (as distinct from the state) is nothing if not a consequence of myriad individual and private matters and transactions, in the very practical sense that all things moral, and all transactions, whether moral or merely economic, obviously involve more than one person, and so in their very expression they become public, and no longer private. That is why to speak of all things individual and private as off limits to others must be seen as an attempt to quarantine the very concept of society. It is to assume that all of the qualities that emerge from the moral code and authority of society—all civility, manners, and decorum—simply do not exist, have no reality, and cannot affect us personally unless we ourselves individually choose to will them into existence. The result is a political landscape in which there is only the state and autonomous individuals, and nothing in between. It is by taking this sort of refuge in an assumed sanctity of the individual that the new kind of conservative runs straight into the arms of the nanny state. The reason is that, even when the modern state is not ideologically driven, it simply finds it more efficient to dissolve—or to preserve in form but legally to disempower in substance—the myriad kinds of voluntary authority it considers so annoying and obstructive. In so doing, it is happy to replace the mediating institutions of society with a mass of autonomous individuals who are foolish enough to believe that their conduct is nobody’s business but their own. This belief, when it becomes pervasive, opens the path to total governmental control. This belief also constitutes the psychological prerequisite for the transition from organic democracy to hyperdemocracy.

As described in *The Trouble with Democracy*,<sup>2</sup> hyperdemocracy refers to the recent extension of democratic claims previously associated with majorities (whose interests were deemed superior to those of their individual members) to individuals themselves. This

*“Locus of sovereignty”  
shifted  
downward.*

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<sup>2</sup> William D. Gairdner, *The Trouble With Democracy* (Toronto: Stoddart, 2001).

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inversion of the classical concept of the priority of the social and moral good to the interests of atomistic individuals has been made possible by a downward shift in society's perception of the "locus of sovereignty," from God to kings, thence to aristocrats and elites, thence to "the people" as divine (encapsulated in the phrase *Vox Populi, Vox Dei*). Finally, under modern hyperdemocracy, sovereignty has moved from the people to the autonomous individual.

*Democracy  
traditionally  
served  
common good,  
not individual  
whims.*

For all its failings, the older organic style was deeply rooted in the idea that sovereignty must be located in the whole community, in the bonds of civil society from which both government and the individual spring—the first to serve that society, and the second to nurture and protect it. Perhaps G. K. Chesterton put it simplest when he said that the "first principle" of democracy is our understanding that "the essential things in men are the things they hold in common, not the things they hold separately," which is to say that democracy was held to have a group meaning and not an individual one.

In order to protect civil society from government excesses, those living under this earlier form clung to the distinction between "power" and "authority" outlined above. Authority for them was inherent in the very nature of free institutions, especially in the natural family. We need to be free precisely so that we may bind ourselves voluntarily to some social or moral or familial order of our choosing. But outside all this, like some sort of monster, lurked the power of an alien *imperium* known as government, or the state, or a monarch, or despot, as the case might be; an unavoidable necessity, perhaps, but always something deemed parasitical by nature, potentially dangerous, and therefore to be closely controlled and limited.

But what a difference now. Our modern hyperdemocracy rests on a contrary assumption never seen before in human history, namely, that sovereignty and democratic right are no longer located in the people, in the whole community, but have descended to autonomous individuals. Once this belief settles in, the natural result is an avalanche of newly invented democratic rights and claims advanced by individuals acting either alone or in pressure groups held together by narrow self interest. Most of these asserted rights are aimed not at a government the people wish to keep at bay, as in the past, but rather against the traditions, institutions and moral authority of their own civil society—which is to

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say, against ourselves and the bonds of community. In this scenario, the new *imperium* itself ends up providing the ammunition and firing the guns at society through its courts, tribunals, and officials.

Here is one man's account of how this strange transformation has happened, step by step.

Organic democracy of the society-first, Christian-based sort, so cherished in the Western world through the middle of the twentieth century, unquestioningly assumed the existence of a fallen and corruptible humanity. As God is good, who else could be responsible for evil but Man? That's why this form of democracy may accurately be said to follow the "Sinful Man" model. It rests on the conviction—one well supported by the evidence of human history—that, absent the necessary institutional impediments and moral controls, most people will tend to fall into selfishness, corruption, weakness, and even radical evil. Such a belief system relies on three interdependent understandings: that there must be a ruling and perfect God above, the natural law within, and a firm moral community rooted in the classical and Christian virtues and the Ten Commandments. Ideas of government are conceived accordingly. Government of any type, but especially a democracy, subject as it is to popular impulse, must be guarded, checked, and balanced, because obviously only a carefully filtered expression of the will of any mass of corruptible people ought to be heeded. It is just common sense that only the wisest people, or the natural aristocracy of such a society, ought to legislate, just as only a captain and officers and not the deckhands ought to guide a ship. This was the underlying ideological basis of the American and Canadian political systems.

*"Sinful Man"  
model of  
society valued  
checks and  
balances.*

But there has always been an alternative and equally ancient force operating in the West that is based on the very opposite assumptions. Beginning with a whisper, and growing to a shout these days, it has always protested with a kind of moral outrage against the idea that human beings are inherently corrupt, or sinful. It says, "No! In our essence we are pure and perfectible, just as God made us!" Its central premise is that it has never been we, ourselves, who are corrupt, but our messy and imperfect societies, governments, and political representatives. In this attitude we spy a naïve version of that old Garden of Eden vision of an inno-

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*“Sinless  
Man” model  
favors  
unrestrained  
popular will.*

cent humanity before the Fall. This view of man forms the other half of the debate between the two initially religious, but now predominantly secular, visions of humanity so in evidence in disputes over opposing democratic principles even today. The “Sinless Man” model of society cannot be reconciled with its alternative. Wherever we find it operating, we also find an insistence that methods of government must be introduced that allow for more—and more direct—expression of the ostensibly faultless popular will. In effect, advocates of the goodness of man want both society and government to serve man’s nature, and once this is achieved, all human institutions, it is believed, will become good, just like man. Hence the urgent expectation today is that under such a system just about everything must be controlled directly by the pure will of the people as it is expressed at any moment, even electronically, if possible, and this will must be unchecked, unmediated, and free from all corrupting restraint. Down with all those who tell us what to do! Why not simply tell ourselves what to do?

It so happens there have been lots of Sinless Man political visions of this sort in our history, mostly of the religious type. But the first modern secular one erupted as a threatening political force only at the end of the eighteenth century in one distinct form, and soon thereafter, in the middle of the nineteenth century, and in reaction to it, in an opposing form. The first was what we might call a “democracy of the One,” and the second a “democracy of the Many.” The original high priests of these two irreconcilable alternatives were Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Stuart Mill, and I have argued in *The Trouble With Democracy* that each of them, despite his anti-religious rhetoric, ended up producing his own deeply mystical concepts of democracy dressed up in secular, rational-sounding language.

In his *Social Contract*, Rousseau argued (as did his later Canadian acolyte Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau) for the expression of an intangible “General Will” of the people as the purest form of democracy. He imagined a mystical corporate body of all citizens whose individual wills were dissolved into One. We all know the nightmare of totalitarian democracy to which this belief led in the French Revolution (and then in the twentieth century, when this style rose again with a vengeance in Marxism and Nazism). But it was due largely to that first disastrous and embarrassing historical debacle of democracy in France, so warmly embraced in theory

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by enthusiastic democrats everywhere—and then so abhorred in its brutal practice—that the long search began for a new and non-collectivist form of democratic polity.

It did not take long. By the middle of the nineteenth century John Stuart Mill had formulated the clearest recipe for an alternative in his booklet *On Liberty*. He imagined a polity of millions of authentic, well educated, and freely choosing autonomous selves surprisingly like himself making their way to perfection under a secular and ostensibly neutral rule of law. This form remains the leading democratic ideal of the West, especially in the Anglo-Saxon nations, but it has always existed in tension, more or less, with the prior collectivist form. Indeed, the twentieth century was a terrible battleground for these two conflicting democratic solutions, or ideals. We know the outcome. The democracy of the One, sometimes called totalitarian democracy, was defeated, but soon afterward many of its collectivist ideals and policies were adopted by the victors, carefully dressed up in rhetoric befitting a democracy of the Many, or hyperdemocracy.

*Totalitarian  
and atomistic  
democracy  
both fit Sinless  
Man model.*

One conclusion that seems inescapable to close observers of the history of democracy is that both these forms are potentially dangerous because they corrode natural and spontaneous communities. They break down the moral interdependence and authority essential to a free, civil society. In fact both forms end up specifically targeting civil society as the enemy of democratic freedom. Rousseau's democracy of the One did so by openly attacking society in principle, and from above, in the name of the people. To him, the various forms of moral, social, and religious bonding that produce the interlocking forms of authority normal to free societies were enemies of the state because any one of them could obstruct its power by defying the General Will of the people.

Mill's alternative democracy of the Many, however, soon began its own corrosive and covert attack on civil society from below, this time in the name of "individual rights." We can see why. Once we begin to believe that democratic right is inherent in the individual rather than in society or communities, we assume each one of us to have an implicit licence to attack any form of authority that we believe is impeding our "freedom" and "democracy."

So it seems that both of these forms of the Sinless Man model have used the language of democracy, each in its own way, to at-

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*For Sinless  
Man forms of  
democracy,  
non-govern-  
mental social  
authority is  
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enemy.*

tack civil society, although from different motives. And this is easy for them to do because, as previously noted, this is a language with no fixed content. Its terms are purely abstract, and in order to have a desired effect in the real world they must always be given a particular meaning, usually by some juridical body. That is why so many individuals who are making a claim on the grounds of a passionately felt but abstract democratic right prefer in their effort to obtain it to avoid the democratic process altogether. They run to courts and tribunals instead.

Now it is time to explain how, as a result of this long conflict between the two main secular democratic “solutions” tried in the West to date, we have come to rest—quite contentedly, it seems—in our libertarian socialism. For we seem to have ended up neither with Rousseau’s single *corporate body* of the self-perfecting people (something we have come to associate with that horrid totalitarianism) nor with Mill’s mass of free and autonomous, self-perfecting *individuals* (something we think of as too libertarian, and maybe as a recipe for anarchy).

Instead, we have produced a synthesis of the two mentioned forms of democracy, a phenomenon I call hyperdemocracy that centers on a paradoxical concept and symbol, that of a *corporate individual*. Rousseau has quietly swallowed up Mill in a sense, but in effect both have merged into a new and different entity.

The defining features of this new fictional person—a mystical person set up as a symbolic control device—are determined, as it happens, not by any democracy of “the people” (an older entity long ago dissolved into constituent individuals), but by the officials and fellow travelers of the democratic-egalitarian state in their capacities as judges, tribunalists, commissioners, academics, and influential media figures. All have a stake—often a major career stake—in determining and then struggling to protect the moral and legal attributes of this newly created symbolic individual who now stands for us all. The long and short of this novel situation is that today, whenever we hear the word “democracy” used to defend individual rights, or the rights of society, we had better examine very closely what is meant.

Printed on the facing page is a chart from *The Trouble With Democracy* illustrating just a few of the fundamental differences in meaning that two persons may have in their minds when alluding in debate to “society,” the “individual,” or “democracy.” Within

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**Under Organic Democracy****Under Hyperdemocracy****Conception of Democratic Polity**

Democracy = the people, past, present, and future

Democracy = the people, now

**The Key Value**

Freedom in community

Equality of autonomous citizens

**The Goal of Life**

Virtue, living a good life

Happiness, enjoying Life

**Group Interaction**

Highest respect for social and moral obligations

Highest respect for personal choices

**Relation of Rights and Obligations**

Obligations and duties primary, rights secondary

Rights primary, obligations and duties secondary

**Political vs. Social Unit**

Family the fundamental social unit, the individual the political unit

The individual the fundamental social as well as political unit

**The Source of Goodness**

Goodness comes from correcting self

Goodness comes from correcting society

**The Democratic Vision**

Democratic politics guided by civic responsibilities: community prior to individual

Democratic politics guided by choosing individual ends: individual prior to community

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this framework we can see that any two people who make conflicting claims concerning their democratic rights will eventually have them weighed and judged according to the attitude-filtering influence of our new corporate-individual symbol, the legal attributes of which constitute our contemporary political and moral orthodoxy. This orthodoxy is tested hundreds of times each year in the courts, tribunals, and media of North America, and also in the court of public opinion, the latter largely shaped by these same institutions.

On April 17, 2002, in one of its many efforts to strengthen this new corporate symbol, the government of Canada (which each year has that nation's largest advertising and promotion account) ran full-page advertisements in every major daily celebrating the twentieth anniversary of Canada's "Charter of Rights and Freedoms." In the middle of the ad these words appeared:

"Freedom of opinion. Freedom of expression. Freedom of religion. Freedom of association. Freedom of thought. The Charter. It's ours. It's us."

Leaving aside for the moment the question whether anyone can produce a reasonable distinction between a "thought" and an "opinion," we can move straight to the heart of the matter and ask: Is this statement actually true?

For millions of unobservant people it may seem true. But for millions of others it amounts to a self-flattering national lie. It may be a truth or a lie according to where your ideas fit within the orthodoxy I have described that reigns supreme in most Western democracies today. Individual and democratic rights flow according to one's place on this scale.

For example, as an individual you indeed have freedom of opinion. But you had better express only opinions that are politically correct or orthodox. If you attempt publicly to critique or to win a law case against such policies as welfare laws that weaken marriage and society, or the dominion over the legislature of judges, or public pandering to homosexual behaviour, or divisive immigration policy, or a criminal-friendly justice system, or government-rationed medicare, or if you express any number of other officially unpopular opinions, you will fare very badly. And if you dare to act publicly in ways that offend orthodoxy—especially as regards race, so-called sexual orientation, and gender—you stand a good chance of being vilified, scolded, and even fined and or-

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dered into a “re-education” program of a kind formerly associated only with countries such as communist China, Cambodia, or Cuba.

The same is true for something called freedom of religion. As an individual you have freedom of religion—as long as you keep your religion private and publicly support only the secular and egalitarian ideals and programs of the state, even though in school, at work, or in public, these may grievously offend your religious beliefs. In other words, you have freedom of religious belief as long as you do not act upon it. If those beliefs, which may be shared by millions of fellow citizens in a large faith community, conflict with some secular and ostensibly democratic “right” or “freedom” favored by the state, then you will most certainly not prevail.

*Freedom of religious belief—but not of actions or even expression.*

In conclusion, it seems that if we want to restore democracy by reversing the current trend—that is, by making democracy properly corporate again—we had better start speaking a new political language in defence of the organic form. For example, whenever we hear such words as “freedom” or “choice,” we must insist on a full discussion of the social and moral obligations and duties we owe to each other, and to society. When we hear the word “equality,” we must ask for much more emphasis on such qualities as merit, earned reward, and just deserts, for otherwise unequal things will be made equal by force of the state. When we hear a reference to individual “rights,” we must say: fine, but what about the rights of a decent and ordered civil society, which is our first, last, and only defence against government power? When we hear the word “freedom,” we should remember Lord Acton’s dictum that we need freedom, not to do what we want but what we ought. And, alas, when we hear the word “democracy,” we must now ask for the precise meaning intended rather than agreeing to participate in another dialogue of the deaf.

A century and a half spent narrowing the focus of democracy until it refers only to the rights of a certain carefully defined and controlled symbolic type of secular and purely autonomous individual has resulted in a hollowing out of our communities and a keenly felt loss of the traditional wholeness and natural authority of civil society. This has left us weakened and vulnerable to ever-increasing state control. No longer do we have as a buffer free communities distinguished by the presence of responsible persons

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*Fictional  
rights for  
fictional  
persons.*

proudly living together as independently as possible from the will and the wiles of the state, but rather a collection of disconnected individuals ever more reliant upon that same state for regulations and services we used to provide for ourselves and for each other. We are disconnected partly because we do not care as much any longer about this decline in our condition or whether we have standards in common with our children. We don't have true neighbours anymore—and we don't much care about that, either. This result should not have been unexpected. We were amply warned by many wise observers that, as conduct has to be directed by some power, the state would step into the vacuum left by the absence of shared moral standards and the authority of civil society. The state would do so gladly with boundlessly generous offers to guide and direct, provide and decide, shape and control.

*Autonomous  
social  
institutions a  
counterweight  
to excessive  
state power.*

The question today is whether the corrosive effects of such a decayed form of democracy can be reversed and some form of organic democracy restored. If there is to be any hope of reversal, surely the first step is to stop asking so incessantly only what it is that we are permitted to do as individuals and to begin reflecting on what is best for us as a people, that is, not as a collection of autonomous selves but rather as a free society of people living together. Such an understanding concerning how we ought to live, as distinct from how we want to live only as individuals, implies an ongoing willingness to sacrifice a bit of our narrow self-interest whenever necessary. Putting checks on such self-interest for the sake of the common good does not have to conflict with the need of persons to express and nourish their own individuality. On the contrary, a community-centered civil society with decentralized authority provides the best breeding ground and protection for a proper personal autonomy. Responsible individualism is inherently self limiting. Like the common good, such individualism is threatened by egotistical self-indulgence.

Having accepted that any true democracy requires limits on self-interest, we then need to see the state less as an expression of society than as a servant of it. Once we have articulated our standards as a free society, we need ceaselessly to inform the state concerning their meaning as well as the precise distance that must be maintained between state power and the authority of our living communities as we express through them our social and moral be-

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ing. Only then will we be able to reclaim democracy as a true voice of the people, rather than as a cheap barter-house for individual wills. Responsible individualism must always be cherished, but such individualism is not a replacement for the well-considered authority of a decent civil society. Although the primary internal function of a well-bonded society is indeed to provide guidelines for how we are to live together, its primary external function is to shelter us from excesses of power including that of government. For it is chiefly through civil society, not the state, that we become part of and grow as people, and it is civil society, not the state, from which we derive and to which we give the meaning of our common life.