

Election Mystery

“Mystery shrouds leadership change” (*FT* headline of a factually informative article about the goings-on in China, 27 October 2012)

The details of how leaders are changed in China are not made public. There are no press releases from the conclave that elects a new Pope. Every last detail of the American presidential campaign is available in many media. But of the three, the American ultra-democratic way of doing things is the most mysterious in the sense of being the hardest to understand except as a *reductio ad absurdum*. The electoral process starts more than a year before the election (which in any case has no one fixed date because of early voting and postal voting) and obsesses the whole political class of the U.S.A. for the duration. A series of primary/caucus mini elections state by state, unregulated by the constitution, elects, by party, representatives to appoint party candidates, but the voters need not be members of any party. The election itself is not directly for a president, but for a state body to appoint representatives to an electoral college (the states are not obliged by the constitution to represent the relative polling strengths of candidates), a complication that allows the possibility, realised in the last election but one, of a president's being elected without a majority. The sums of money spent trying to influence the electorate are greater than the gdp of some states, probably totalling six [American] billion dollars according to *Economic Times*. It is not unimaginable for a candidate to think he owes some good turns to large donors. During this long election period US politics *consists of* electioneering. The incumbent president is a “lame duck”, whether because he [never yet she] is about to retire thanks to the US convention observed since the Second World War that no president serves more than two terms, or because he is afraid of missing re-election. As democracy, as election, as a form of government, can this make sense? It is far easier to understand the Athenian/New Testament method of drawing lots.

So far had I jotted when Superstorm Sandy struck New York, and President Obama flew back to Washington and declared a Major Disaster. Why in any functioning polity the head of state is expected to have day-to-day command of the response to natural disasters is another of the mysteries of democracy, but this is the expectation of the U.S. electorate and therefore dictates. To fulfil the expectation President Obama had to suspend his election campaign. Mr Romney suspended his also, presumably out of a sense of decency. Both sides agreed, that is, that the election is incompatible with the government of the country.

American presidential elections are only a particularly blatant example of a general truth about democracy as that is now understood in the West. Our version of democracy is hardly compatible with good government if only because it is natural for the elected representatives / delegates to worry more about pleasing the electorate or doing the will of [the majority of] the people than about, for instance, justice.

Over here we are about to have our first elections for police commissioners, at a salary of £75,000 a year. My own choice, a Conservative leaflet tells me, is between Conservative and Labour (though in fact two independents are standing). Are there any reasons at all for expecting the introduction of party politics into policing to make any improvement? There is a strong and obvious reason for expecting the contrary. Perhaps the new commissioners will defy their parties if they think fit, and show no favour to donors to their campaigns. Perhaps they will even forget their interest in £75,000 p.a. But they are sure to be more worried than an appointed official about popularity ratings, which can only dilute any attention to justice they may have.

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