

**U3A PORT PHILLIP  
PHILOSOPHY AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES**

**Class 4 (Tuesday, 27 March 2018): Issues in Representation**

**CONTEXT**

2017 was a disappointing year for the two main political parties. Collectively they failed to manage the issue of same sex marriage, putting on centre stage representation by plebiscite and a conscience vote in the national parliament. The almost unprecedented use of the plebiscite, and more notoriously the Brexit vote in the UK, raised questions about the expression and representation of the popular will,

Managing the SSM and other issues was not helped by the electoral success of One Nation Party and other political groupings

The rise of populism across the globe has stimulated academic debate on the threats to representative democracy and is a reminder that the established political parties need to justify their role, organization, membership and performances in representative democracies. In Australian politics neither the plebiscite nor the established main political parties seemed to be wholly trusted by the electorate and both pose questions on their legitimacy

The same sex marriage, Adani mine and other issues have highlighted the role of social media and what is referred to as monitory democracy in present-day representative democracy.

**ISSUES**

**Are plebiscites legitimate within representative democracy?**

Should we take more decisions by referendum or plebiscite? If so, what sort of issues, and under what conditions? When is the use of either mode of decision-making simply inappropriate? What risks to democracy do they pose?

Was the same sex marriage debate in the end a victory for democracy? Did the debate really persuade anyone?

If the plebiscite is not binding, what is the role of conscience vote in parliament? Should the plebiscite be a binding referendum?

What, if anything, did we learn from the same-sex-marriage plebiscite?

**Have the major political parties had their day?**

How important are political parties to contemporary Australian democracy? Are parties still morally desirable: if so why? What reforms proposed in recent years would add value to the major parties?

Are the current discontents justified, or are they based on unfair expectations of the role of parties. In his seminal work on political parties, Michels described them as patronage machines. Is he perhaps right, at least partly, and is that a bad thing?

Party membership has been declining in numbers in recent years. Is this decline that important to the quality of Australian democracy?

Is a coherent party system still possible, or morally desirable?

Is the Australian party system threatened by a rise in populism e.g. One Nation, or identity politics? How valuable is the system of compulsory voting?

Is there a movement away from representative politics towards other modes such as Keane's concept of monitory democracy? Is this desirable?

How important is it that citizens participate in politics outside of elections? How important are developments such as Get-up and direct participation movements,

## **KEY READINGS**

### **Plebiscites**

"When are plebiscites legitimate" Radio National, The Minefield, 16 Sept 2016  
<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/theminefield/when-are-plebiscites-legitimate/7799492>

"Same Sex Marriage Debate – Are we better for it?" Radio national, The Minefield, 15 Nov 2017.  
<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/theminefield/the-same-sex-marriage-debate:-are-we-better-for-it/9150192>

Edmund Burke, Speech to the Electors of Bristol, 3 Nov 1774  
[Representation: Edmund Burke, Speech to the Electors of Bristol](http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch13s7.html)  
[press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch13s7.html](http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch13s7.html)

Judith Brett, "A travesty of process", The Monthly, November 2017.  
[A travesty of process | The Monthly](https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2017/november/.../judith-brett/travesty-process)  
<https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2017/november/.../judith-brett/travesty-process>

### **Political Parties**

"Have political parties had their day", Radio National, The Minefield, 12 July 2017

John Keane, "The End of representative politics?" The Conversation, 20 May 2015  
<https://theconversation.com/the-end-of-representative-politics-41997>

## **Populism**

Denis Altman, "Discontents, identity, politics and institutions in a time of populism ", The Conversation, 30 Jul 2017.  
<https://theconversation.com/discontents-identity-politics-and-institutions-in-a-time-of-populism-80882>

## **FURTHER READINGS**

Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, on Democracy – read sections 3.1 to 5.3  
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/democracy/>

Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy on Rousseau and the General Will, section 3.1 – 3.4  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rousseau/#IdeaGeneWill>

"Postal survey ends don't justify means", Neve Mahoney, Eureka Street, Vol. 27, No. 22, 14 November 2017  
<https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=54328>

Joel Harrison, "Against popular will: why plebiscites need not be binding," ABC Religion and Ethics, 8 Aug 2016  
<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2016/08/08/4514900.htm>

Marc Fleurbaey, "Populism as a challenge to democracy from within", Princeton University.  
<http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org/sites/default/files/ssn-basic-facts-fleurbaey-on-populism.pdf>

AC Grayling, "Brexit; Is it starting to look like a coup", 9 May 2017  
<https://www.euractiv.com/section/uk-europe/interview/a-c-grayling-brexit-is-starting-to-look-a-lot-like-a-coup/>

"The Origins of monitory democracy",  
John Keane, University of Sydney, The Conversation, 24 Sept 2012.  
<http://theconversation.com/the-origins-of-monitory-democracy-9752>