

Rome Speech

As well as being the capital of Italy and Catholicism, and a famously beautiful city, with a great climate and fantastic food, Rome is also something else. It's a place where politics has gone on - and has been recorded - for some three thousand years. Rome is a political case study like nowhere else on earth. Romans have lived under every kind of political system, from oligarchy to theocracy, and from dictatorship and monarchy to democracy. Often Romans have lived under more than one at the same time. This forum is about democracy and cities. Is there anything we can learn from Romans' various experiences of democracy? Should they fill today's democrats with hope or fear?

Before this present age, democracy enduringly showed its face in Rome three times: under the classical Roman Republic, under the medieval Senate, and under the constitutional Kingdom of Italy. None of these was in any way perfect. To our eyes the medieval Senate, which met on this very hill, was barely recognizable as a democracy. Dominated by Rome's wealthiest families, it was a strange, unstable institution. Sometimes there were 56 senators, sometimes just one. And yet even here the spirit of democracy can be clearly seen. There were elections of some kind, though it's not clear who voted or how. And there was passion, to give Roman citizens a voice, to counter the autocracy of the popes, and to defend Rome's heritage. Evidence suggests the Senate may first have come in being after Romans grew angry when pope Innocent II looted the Baths of Caracalla for stone.

Though the Senate survived in some form for centuries, it was soon ground down by the power of the papacy. Put simply, the popes had the money - from church property, taxes and from pilgrims. If the demise of the Senate has a lesson for us today, it is that democracy needs proper funding. It needs taxes. That may seem obvious. Yet in these days of offshore banking,

and when trillionaire tech companies feel no moral compunction to pay tax to anyone, it is no bad thing to have a reminder.

The Roman Republic of classical times was much more recognizable as a democracy, though it, too, was a very flawed one. Like the medieval Senate, it was dominated by rich aristocratic families who sometimes bribed and threatened voters. And yet, as in any functioning democracy, there was free speech, while the votes of the poorer Plebians, from the city and the nearby countryside, could make a real difference. The Plebians also stood up for themselves. Well organized, they fought hard for their rights, political and economic, and sometimes took a very radical form of strike action, marching out of the city en masse and decamping to a hill outside.

What killed the Roman Republic? A key factor was inequality. During this era Rome became a slave economy. Rich Romans, determined to outdo one another in wealth, kicked poor farmers off their land so they could create huge, highly profitable slave estates. Poor Romans in the city could not compete with unpaid slaves and became dependent on state handouts. Over the centuries vast wealth became concentrated in the hands of an ever smaller number of people. Sounds familiar? So here's another warning from Rome's past. Inequality is bad for democracy. If ordinary people feel themselves ever worse off, while a tiny minority is visibly, shockingly wealthy, there is a real danger that people will cease to believe that democracy can serve them. They will cease to feel involved and will look to simple answers and new saviours. Dictatorship beckons. And there is always a would-be dictator in the wings, waiting their chance.

Thirdly and finally we come to Rome - and Italy's - years of constitutional monarchy under the Savoy Kings. Like the medieval Senate and the classical Roman Republic, this was far from perfect. As ever, it was dominated by wealthy families. Too many Italians had no vote. There was corruption and clannishness. And yet, unlike the other two regimes we have

looked at, this was clearly recognizable as a modern democracy. The electorate felt its powers and flung out governments it ceased to support. There were radical changes of leadership between conservatives and socialists. People from relatively modest backgrounds made their way to the top.

What destroyed this democracy? Two things: war and fear. In May 1915, after months of furious of furious debates and demonstrations, Italy entered the First World War. Though the Italians fought courageously, had a good number of successes, and were on the winning side, the cost was enormous. More than half a million Italians died and many more were left disabled. Italy became filled with angry, war-brutalized soldiers who wondered what their sacrifice had been for. For them a vote in elections was no longer enough. They wanted to feel power in their hands. And many Italians - especially the wealthy, the conservative, and the religiously devout - were happy to give them power because of their fear: fear of something scarily alien: Russian Bolshevism.

Today people worry that our democracies are threatened by fake news and the power of social media, but I would say this is misleading. Fake news has been around as long as politics itself, and social media is just a new way of transmitting it. Fake news is only believed because the existing structure has already lost credibility. War, fear, failure to tax and inequality will all cause this to happen. At this moment the most destructive of the four, without question, are inequality and fear: fear of financial uncertainty, fear of losing one's livelihood to an app, and fear of the scarily alien phenomena of our own time: Islamic fundamentalism and boatloads of immigrants.

But a look at Rome's long history does more than just help us see democracy's weak spots. It also reminds us why democracy is worth having, and worth fighting for.

Ancient Rome's first true emperor, Augustus, who dismantled the Roman Republic, is often remembered rather fondly today, as a leader who brought peace to Rome after decades of civil war and chaos. Yet it was Augustus who also made Rome into a police state and stifled free speech, prompting a slow decline in Roman culture. And, by depriving people of the power to choose their leaders, Augustus opened the way to monsters. He himself may have been a relatively benign autocrat, but that wasn't so of his successors, who included a murderous paranoid schizophrenic (Caligula) and a murderous and talentless wannabee singer (Nero). As Romans became accustomed to subjection, murderous emperors became the norm. Peace didn't last long either. The empire evolved into a military dictatorship in which would-be emperors seized control by means of brutal civil wars, which became commonplace, and were a major factor in the empire's eventual collapse.

Benito Mussolini, who also dismantled a functioning democracy, was a great admirer of Augustus. Mussolini felt nothing but scorn for his elected predecessors, whom he considered ineffectual, lazy and self-serving. Fascism, by contrast, he saw as dynamic, selfless and efficient. Yet the truth was rather different. Italy's Fascist rulers, bereft of scrutiny or criticism, made bad decisions. The two yardsticks by which Mussolini felt a regime should be judged were the economy and military power. Under elected governments before the First World War, Italy's economy had been one of the fastest growing in Europe, ahead even of Germany's. Under Fascism it was one of the very slowest. When it went to war in 1915 Italy, though still a poor country, was well prepared and it held its own against bigger, richer states. When Fascist Italy went to war in 1940 its military was deplorably under-strength and badly-equipped, and in its first major campaign its armies were beaten back by a far smaller, weaker state - Greece. Disaster followed disaster.

Like any dictatorship, where government is answerable to nobody, Fascism became corrupt. Though Mussolini himself was not avaricious, he made little or no effort to restrain the many in his movement who were. Leading Fascists became quickly and inexplicably wealthy. Previously poor local Fascist bosses went on lavish holidays, sent their wives on shopping trips in official cars, and ate in the best restaurants, often without paying the bill. Ordinary Italians could only look on, knowing there was nothing they could do.

And this, more than anything else is the reason democracy, for all of its many flaws, is worth fighting for. Under a democratic government people can complain of injustice and can appeal to the legal system - however slow and clunking it is - for restitution. A democratic system does not need to be ingeniously representative, or even to be completely fair. It needs to give ordinary people the power to look over their rulers' shoulders and make them nervous of failure. Most of all, when a regime does fail, democracy needs to give people the power to chuck it out, without having to risk their lives in an insurrection.

Is democracy in peril now, as many people worry? Democracy faces real danger when voters cease to believe that any elected leaders will look out for them, or will answer their fears. That's the moment when, in desperation, they lunge for easy answers and new saviours - the moment the dictators waiting in the wings are dreaming of.

To keep that moment at bay, democratic leaders need to do only one thing. The need to remember who they're really working for. They need to serve not themselves but ordinary people. They need to listen to voters, not those who have money to pour into party funds.

I don't think we're close to that moment yet. I don't see this as a time to despair. But it is a time to be wary.