

The road to keeping democracy alive

HISTORY/POLITICS

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF DEMOCRACY. By John Keane. Simon & Schuster. 958pp. \$49.99.

Reviewer: **BRENTON HOLMES**

If democracies and their defenders are “sleepwalking their way into deep trouble”, John Keane’s latest tome, *The Life and Death of Democracy*, delivers the kind of slap that should rouse even the most comatose of them. Or more likely, it would concuss them. Coming in at just under a thousand pages, it is not a book for the faint-hearted.

Nor is it a book to be shelved until one has a month free to wade through it. Reading it feels more like surfing than wading, with all the associated plunging and soaring – and the occasional wipe-out.

The Life and Death of Democracy is no staid survey of what has been famously called the worst form of government except for all other forms. It is a rambunctious, polemical, almost Chaucer-like tale, and for that it is both illuminating and entertaining. But the Australian-born Professor of Politics at the University of Westminster is deadly serious about his purpose. Keane wants an honest, thorough-going appraisal of democracy, its heritage and its purpose. If that means prising open – nay, splitting open – closed and self-satisfied democratic minds, so be it. Those who presume to assist matters by describing the past, explaining the present, and charting the future course of “the democracy thing” had better get it right, because democracy could easily “slit its own throat or quietly take its own life in an act of ‘democide’”.

Keane wants us to recognise that democracy “has different, discordant and braided tempos”, and that not everyone agrees that it is self-evidently valuable. He insists democracy “thrives on humility”, telling us bluntly that humble people try to live without illusions, and that “nonsense on stilts, and lies and bullshit sitting on thrones are not their scene”.

He traces the roots of democracy to the Mycenaens of the Bronze Age, about a thousand years before it lodged itself in 5th-century BCE Athens. The lamp was first lit, he argues, in the East (Syria, Iraq, Iran), nurtured by the “proto-democratic instincts of early Muslim communities”. It was in Athens, though, that a recognisably democratic polis took shape. Keane stresses the importance of the communal gathering place, the agora, a “physical and

symbolic space shared in common”, where rich and poor assembled, deliberated, mocked, ostracised and jostled one another through two centuries of self-government before repeated Macedonian invasions put an end to their “potent form of wishful thinking”.

From the ashes of assembly democracy, a “bastard” representative democracy began to emerge in Europe during the 10th century, usually in provincial settings. By the 16th century, many people were still “lukewarm or hostile” to the democratic idea, and even by the 18th century the notion of representative democracy was more often condemned than praised. Keane notes that even the American revolutionaries warned against an “excess of democracy” and that it was only James Madison’s talk of “refining the popular appointments by successive filtrations” that nudged the Founding Fathers to accept a lower house based on popular election.

In Europe, the early parliaments were often muddled affairs, exploited by politicking monarchs. The so-called republican arrangements operating in cities like Venice and Florence were invariably dominated by oligarchs and plutocrats. Notwithstanding these vicissitudes, the “little dream” of democracy persisted, ultimately to “grand effect”. After the public execution of the English king Charles I, “politically speaking, things were never again to be the same in England, or in the rest of Europe”.

And so to the “American century”. Keane provides some fascinating insights into the forging of the republican constitution as a defence “against the perceived vices of democracy” before ranging eloquently through the rise of civil societies and the anti-slavery movement, and on to the anti-democratic effects of late 19th century big business, big parties and Tammany Hall pork-barrelling, and the populist and progressivist backlash that by the 1920s had reinvigorated America’s “remarkable history of democratic inventions”. Keane’s assessment of America’s subsequent ascent to global dominance, and its implications for democracy at home and abroad, is a less flattering one.

Keane hauls us through the South

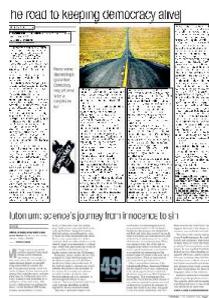
America’s democratic experiments that, after the 1929 Wall Street crash, “fell like tender buds in a spring frost”, then drags us back to Europe and the “long grave dug by the Great War” into which democracy slid with the rise of totalitarianism. The remarkable recovery and spread of democracy post-1950 is given its due, but Keane warns that nothing is guaranteed. Democracy may yet prove to be “a campfire on ice”.

He does, however, report and endorse strongly the development of “a brand new historical form” of democracy that he calls “monitory democracy”. It operates by the “constant public scrutiny of power by hosts of differently sized monitory bodies with footprints large and small”. They include all sorts of associations, NGOs, tribunals – “watch dogs, guide dogs, barking dogs” – that help to keep governments responsive to their citizens.

Keane is especially impressed by the kind of democratic practices that have emerged in India, such as the *panchayat* reforms for devolution of decision-making to the local level, as well as many other devices for publicly checking and monitoring the exercise of power. Keane calls India “democracy’s most compound, turbulent and interesting prototype”.

The dynamics of monitory democracy bring a “viral” quality to politics, made more potent by ready access to cheap, fast and global forms of communication. Keane is aware, however, that communicative abundance does not automatically ensure monitory democracy’s triumph – “profusion breeds confusion” and potentially the spread of a culture of “unthinking indifference”. He thinks that democracy, at the start of the 21st century, is plagued by numerous threats – market failures, social inequality, intolerance, spin, uncivil wars, a wrecked biosphere – “problems for which there are no historical precedents”. He does not say whether he thinks the monitory mode of democracy will survive, let alone flourish.

Keane declared for himself the task of being an “imaginary historian writing 50 years from now” in the hope that such a perspective would help us get a handle on current trends in democracy, and discern which ones were genuinely new and helpful, and which were deeply



threatening. He is the kind of historian who thinks that, for the sake of democracy's future, "much can be learned, an unlearned, from the past". For him, "forgetting, or remembering the wrong things, is dangerous for democracy". Indeed, his final chapter is a didactic setting-down of seven rules for doing a (democratic) history of democracy, reminding readers that history is a bag of tricks played upon the dead by the living, and that to do history is to undertake an

"odyssey that is permanently subject to revisions".

The Life and Death of Democracy sets one's head spinning. It is apposite that Keane should fancy India as a democracy worth emulating, because *Life and Death* displays the qualities of a sprawling Indian novel – a cast of thousands, subplots galore, connections and disconnections, colour, passion and exuberance. Not your average history book.

Brenton Holmes lives in Canberra and

writes on philosophy, culture and politics.

John Keane will give two talks in Canberra next week: on Thursday at the Museum of Democracy, Old Parliament House, he will be in conversation with senior curator Sharon Bulkeley at 5.30pm (doors open at 5.15pm); and on Friday he delivers a Senate occasional lecture, Media Decadence and Democracy, Main Committee Room, Parliament House, 12.15pm-1.15pm, admission free – bookings not required.

Keane warns that nothing is guaranteed. Democracy may yet prove to be 'a campfire on ice'.

