
Introduction

‘REFERENDUMS’, wrote a columnist in *The Observer* in July 2016, ‘are the nuclear weapons of democracy. In parliamentary systems they are redundant. Seeking a simplistic binary yes/no answer to complex questions, they succumb to emotion and run amok. Their destructive aftermath lasts for generations’ (Keegan 2016: 43). It is a fair bet that the author did not vote for Brexit. The issue here is not to claim that politicians and pundits are fickle and unprincipled. The question here is an empirical one; was the pundit correct?

Are there more referendums now than in the past? And, if so, has that made the world become more democratic? Could it be that referendums are linked with the growth in social movements in recent years and the tendency to use alternative channels to challenge the status quo (see Della Porta 2006)? Or, conversely, is the undeniable prominence of referendums undermining representative democracy, as some (Topaloff 2017) have suggested? Or is the growing number of referendums just an indication of a weaker political class prone to miscalculations, as others (Glencross 2016) have suggested?

All these questions are addressed in the following pages. However, the process did not quite follow the plan initially expected or planned. That is in the nature of things.

The chapters in this short book were originally intended to form part of a coherent and theoretical whole; to show how the use of the referendum followed a strict, almost Hegelian pattern of the ‘unfolding of freedom’ throughout the ages – as the

German idealist philosopher might have put it. Yet the more I looked at the particular cases – especially the referendums in the United Kingdom held during the governments of Harold Wilson (1974–76) and David Cameron (2010–16) – the more it became clear to me that there were different, sometimes competing, patterns. Rather than following G.W.F. Hegel, I came to a conclusion much like the one Ludwig Wittgenstein reached when he wrote his *Philosophical Investigations*. As this book is written in the same spirit of this much more illustrious work, I feel justified in quoting the Austrian philosopher at length:

After several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into such a whole, I realized that I should never succeed. The best that I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks; my thoughts were soon crippled if I tried to force them on in any single direction against their natural inclination. – And this was, of course, connected with the very nature of the investigation. For this compels us to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction. – The philosophical remarks in this book are, as it were, a number of sketches of landscapes which were made in the course of these long and involved journeys. The same or almost the same points were always being approached afresh from different directions, and new sketches made. Very many of these were badly drawn or uncharacteristic, marked by all the defects of a weak draughtsman. And when they were rejected a number of tolerable ones were left, which now had to be arranged and sometimes cut down, so that if you looked at them you could get a picture of the landscape. Thus this book is really only an album. (Wittgenstein 1953: vii)

This book, then, is a series of ‘remarks’ and ‘sketches’, which together form a mosaic rather than a coherent whole.

In the first chapter the world history of the referendum is outlined. A chapter follows this on the British experience up to 2010. This was initially intended to be a short overview of the previous referendums – and a detailed analysis of more recent votes. However, when researching the book I noticed

that the referendum on European Economic Community (EEC) membership in 1975 (in effect the first Brexit referendum) in important respects mirrored the vote in 2017 – and yet in other ways was completely different. This, I felt, was important, and I consequently filled rather more pages on the 1975 vote. Thus this referendum looms large in Chapter 2, though we also consider the alternative vote referendum in 2011 and the referendum on Scottish independence in 2014.

Chapter 3 pertains to the United Kingdom European Union (EU) membership referendum in 2016, especially the campaign leading up to it. As in the previous chapter, this vote is analysed empirically but with several excursions into the political theory.

After the analysis of the Brexit referendum, Chapter 4 reverts to the wide world and summarises some of the trends and tendencies in the use of the referendum internationally. As this overview suggests, Britain is not a unique case in holding referendums. The chapter shows that, notwithstanding the general assumptions about referendums, these are not usually associated with demagogues and populism, but the referendum has tended to be used as a constitutional safeguard. However, in Britain, a country without a formal written constitution, these safeguards were not in place. Consequently, a leader like David Cameron was able to use the referendum for party-political purposes in a way that arguably was detrimental to the political system. For the referendum to work – for this institution to be a constitutional safeguard – it must be a people's shield and not the government's sword.