Say's reading materials for Group B

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Democracies need renewal if they are to survive

They can be modernised and restored, though never to permanent, perfect health

TONY BARBER

Like cars, personal computers and the human body, democracies must be fixed from time to time to work well. Today, millions of US and European citizens feel powerless and unrepresented in political and economic systems that respond inadequately to their needs. Mistrust of once deeply respected institutions is widespread. It is becoming fashionable to speak of a "democratic recession", or worse, in western societies.

Every generation is tempted to think that its challenges are unique. History teaches otherwise. The first half of the 20th century encompassed the US Progressive Era, the New Deal and the British Liberal and Labour governments of 1906-14 and 1945-51. In each case, the motivating spirit of reform was the conviction that, to fight off crisis and build a better society, old forms of political representation and economic management must adapt to far-reaching social and industrial change.

Democracies can die — of that there should be no doubt. But they can also be modernised and restored to good working order, though never to permanent, perfect health. Much depends on the diagnosis and proposed remedies. In today's conditions, although the two sets of problems overlap, it helps to distinguish between the need to improve democratic representation on the

one hand, and the need to advance social cohesion and prosperity on the other.

The focus on Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election, and in various EU votes including the UK's Brexit referendum, has distracted attention from the fundamentally homegrown nature of the flaws in western democracy. In the US, suppressing voters' rights, gerrymandering congressional districts and the failure to reform campaign finance rules have nothing to do with Russia. The same is true for corruption and bad governance in individual European countries, and for the insufficient accountability of EU institutions.

Undeniably, the west's adversaries and competitors have learnt how to stir up trouble. Russia's tactics involve identifying a divisive issue, such as race in the US or migration in Europe, and whipping up anger on both sides of the argument in order to obstruct reasoned debate and paralyse government. Fake news, spread through social media, is part of the Russian armoury.

But fake news is also something at which unscrupulous US and European politicians shamelessly connive. It is not exactly new. The forged Zinoviev letter, which emerged just before the 1924 UK general election and was connected to British secret service, Conservative party and media intrigues rather than to Moscow, is as good an example of fake news as you will find in the past century.

Of course, strengthening formal democratic processes against foreign meddling is essential. Emmanuel Macron, France's president, proposes a "European agency for the protection of democracies" to protect against cyberattacks and other manipulation. But the risk with this initiative is that it might add nothing more than another layer of ineffective EU bureaucracy.

Under a more ambitious approach, every European country would pass laws stipulating total transparency about the financing of political parties and candidates, including who pays for online advertising. Banks, businesses, lobbying groups, media and others could likewise be obliged to declare any foreign financial support. However, even to shine a light on the dark financial

corners of modern western politics would not fully address the problem of political representation.

During the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath, a sense of extreme inequality and unfairness has gripped millions of citizens, coupled with the feeling that their political institutions offered too little scope for doing much about it.

As governments bailed out banks, recouping the money by raising taxes and cutting the welfare state, citizens felt they were carrying the can for unaccountable elites who captured the state and business world. Slow-burning frustration was intensified by the feeling that politics is now the preserve of special interests.

For some reform-minded politicians and civic activists, the renewal of democracy means expanding participation in public life, creating new forums to operate alongside traditional parliaments and parties. "Deliberative democracy", or citizens' assemblies, have brought promising results in Australia, Canada and Ireland.

By contrast, the EU's most important tool for participatory democracy, known as the European Citizens' Initiative, has been a bit of a flop. Even mass petitions with more than 1m signatures have failed to persuade the European Commission to prepare legislation on the issues raised by campaigners. Mr Macron's "Great Debate", an effort to reinvigorate French democracy after his presidency fell into trouble last year amid the gilets jaunes protests, has had mixed results. Despite 2m online contributions and 10,000 local meetings, most participants were older, wealthier, well-educated and urban.

Any attempt at reviving democracy must include a sustained effort to protect living standards and improve economic opportunities for citizens pushed to the margins — all the more necessary in the age of artificial intelligence. Cleaning up politics and broadening democratic participation are important, but no less so is reform of the western capitalist model itself.

tony.barber@ft.com