

The Athenian democracy began in 508 BC with the reforms of Cleisthenes and, missing a few beats, lasted unbroken until 322 BC. 186 years of democracy (minus a year and a few months while the Athenians misbehaved) is a very impressive record of stability. Remember, Canada itself is only 125 years old and is currently struggling to continue as a country. But 186 years is a misleading figure since the democracy not only sputtered on and off right down to the Roman conquest, but even in Roman Imperial times decrees of the popular assembly (the Ecclesia of the Demos) were still being produced. All of this runs counter to the widely held view that

- a) the democracy was very short-lived, shining like some brief shooting star in the constitutional firmament,
- b) the democracy was inherently unstable and easily unravelled,
- c) only the 5th century BC was the great age of Athenian democracy, especially the period from 461-429 BC (Periclean).

In great part this wonderful participatory democracy lasted because of its own great merits. It was predicated upon the noble concept that the citizens (males over 18 born of citizen parents) were equal, especially in politics and before the law, if not in wealth, education, talent or good looks. This idea is eternally attractive to civilized people. We must remember, however, the fact that the Athenians denied this wonderful equality to women, slaves, immigrants, other Greeks, and barbarians.

The other major reason for the attractiveness of democracy was that its alternatives proved to be dismal choices, especially the oligarchic option, the rule of the few. Democracy might not be ideal (2 cheers for Democracy!) but oligarchy was to prove an unmitigated disaster and leave such a legacy of revulsion behind it that no right-thinking person could consider it a viable possibility after the year 403 BC.

For a short time in 411 BC and later in 404/3 BC Athens was run by a narrow right-wing elite of vicious, brutal characters. Death squads, greedy confiscations of property, illegalities and bare-faced privileges for the ruthless oligarchs themselves sickened all but the most degenerate citizens. Throughout the 4th century the Athenians adhered staunchly and steadily to democracy as the best system available anywhere below Mt. Olympus. When the democracy fell in 322 it was because of a victorious Macedonian warlord called Antipater. Even then men of property (about a quarter of the former citizens) were still allowed a vote, though in a Greece where Athens' overall power had been severely curtailed. For a time Athens in

the period after 322 even suffered a beneficent tyrant to rule her briefly before the alternation among democracy, a curtailed democracy (i.e. only men of property voted) and oligarchy continued.

As late as 103 BC, well after the Roman conquest of Greece in 146 BC, we find a democracy being overthrown internally by oligarchic plotters. A few years later the barbarian king Mithridates of Pontus, through his Athenian agents, orchestrated a democratic counter-coup. It was now time for the oligarchs to be massacred, a typical happening for the losers in these affairs. In 83 BC Sulla, the Roman general, looted the city, massacred the poor democrats and set up an oligarchy. Julius Caesar then came along in 48 BC and for many cryptic and complex reasons, or because he just didn't like Sulla, restored to the now somewhat dizzy Athenians their democracy. This was the now chastened and subdued constitution which limped into the Imperial period, a mere municipal government at best. Rome liked oligarchies but suffered democracies if they were moderate and well-behaved (i.e. obedient). Democracy in Athens didn't die easily and even though the constitution eventually became a sort of sentimental show piece or olive-veneer piece of constitutional antique-furniture, it still shows us in today's tumultuous world that a fine concept once hatched is hard to get back into the egg.