CHURCHILL AND DEMOCRACY

By Roland Quinault

CHURCHILL'S views on democracy – both in theory and in practice – are of interest for many reasons. He played a leading role in the ideological battles between democracy and dictatorship in the first half of the twentieth century and he was one of the principal architects of the modern democratic world order. Yet Churchill was widely regarded, particularly in the middle phase of his career, as a reactionary and anti-democratic figure. This conundrum will be examined by considering Churchill's attitude to the concept of democracy and democratic reform – both at home and abroad – over his long career. Churchill was born in 1874 when the great majority of adults in Britain were still disenfranchised and he died in 1965 the year when the Voting Rights Act ended electoral racial discrimination in the United States. Thus his life roughly spanned the period during which universal suffrage democracy became the basis of political legitimacy in the western world.

Churchill's engagement with democracy began early in his life. In his famous address to the US Congress, in 1941, he declared:

> I was brought up in my father's house to believe in democracy. 'Trust the people' that was his message … Therefore I have been in full harmony all my life with the tides which have flowed on both sides of the Atlantic against privilege and monopoly and I have steered confidently towards the Gettysburg ideal of 'government of the people by the people for the people'.[1]

When Winston was born, however, the political outlook of his father, Lord Randolph Churchill, was still strongly conservative. In 1878, for example, Lord Randolph complained that recent Tory legislation was based 'upon principles which were purely democratic'.[2] It was not until 1884, that Gladstone's introduction of a new Parliamentary Reform Bill prompted Randolph to embrace the principle of democracy, albeit it for conservative ends: 'Trust the people … and they will trust you – and they will follow you and join you in the defence of the Constitution

[1] Winston S. Churchill, *The Unrelenting Struggle: War Speeches* (1942), 334: 29 December 1941.

[2] *Parliamentary Debates* (hereafter *Parl. Deb.*), 3rd series, 238, (1878), 907.

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against every and any foe. I have no fear of democracy.'[3]

Thereafter Randolph was generally associated, in the public mind, with the concept of 'Tory democracy', which he defined, somewhat paradoxically, as both 'a democracy which supports the Tory party' and a government inspired 'by lofty and by liberal ideas'.[4] Randolph's concept of Tory democracy had a profound and lasting influence on Winston's political ideology. He considered that Tory democracy was his father's 'central idea', but conceded that it was 'necessarily a compromise ... between widely different forces and ideas'.[5]

In 1897 – two years after his father's death – Winston privately confessed that he was 'a Liberal in all but name' but went on to state that because he opposed Irish Home Rule, 'Tory Democracy will have to be the standard under which I shall range myself.' At the same time, he advocated manhood suffrage, universal education, payment of members and a progressive income tax.[6] In some contemporary notes, however, he expressed some pragmatic reservations about the extension of democracy:

> Ultimately 'one man, one vote' is logically and morally certain'. The question as to the rate at which we move to so desirable a goal is one which depends on local and temporary circumstances ... I would extend the franchise to the whole people not by giving votes to the ignorant and indigent, but by raising those classes to the standard when votes may be safely given. This will take time ... The principle is one of levelling up.[7]

Churchill also expressed opposition to female suffrage on the grounds that it would increase hysterical faddism and religious intolerance and make women the dominant power in the community.[8]

When Churchill began his parliamentary career as a candidate at Oldham, in 1899, he described himself a Tory democrat and declared that the Tory democracy was 'the backbone of the party'.[9] After his election for Oldham in 1900 he continued to regard himself as a

[3] Winston S. Churchill, *Lord Randolph Churchill* (1907) 239: speech at Birmingham, 16 April 1884.

[4] *Ibid.*, 240: speech at Birmingham, 9 April 1888. See also: Roland Quinault, 'Lord Randolph Churchill and Tory Democracy 1880–1885', *Historical Journal*, 22 (1979), 141–65.

[5] Churchill, *Randolph Churchill*, 237–8, 821.

[6] Randolph S. Churchill, *Winston S. Churchill* (hereafter Randolph Churchill, *Churchill*): *Companion*, I, part 2 (1967), 751: Winston Churchill to Lady Randolph Churchill, 6 April 1897.

[7] *Ibid.*, 767: notes on the Annual Register.

[8] *Ibid.*, 765.

[9] Robert Rhodes James (ed.), *Winston S. Churchill: His Complete Speeches, 1897–1963* (8 vols., New York, 1974) (hereafter Churchill, *Speeches*), I, 33–5: Oldham, 24, 26 June 1899.

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democratic Tory, even when mixing with aristocratic friends and relatives.[10] His cousin's wife, the duchess of Marlborough – the American heiress, Consuelo Vanderbilt – thought that Churchill 'represented the democratic spirit so foreign to my environment, and which I deeply missed'.[11]

Churchill's conversion to Liberalism, in 1904, strengthened his faith in democracy. In 1905 he introduced a motion to reduce the duration of parliaments from seven to five years in order to strengthen the authority of the legislature against the increasing power of the executive.[12] He also favoured longer general election campaigns and a second ballot to 'secure a proper majority representation'.[13] Churchill believed that tariff reform could only be defeated by 'the sledge hammer of democracy' – a massive vote for free trade at the polls.[14] This was achieved by the 1906 'Liberal landslide' and thereafter Churchill used the term 'democracy' as a synonym for mass support for Liberalism.[15]

Churchill's conversion to Liberalism was followed by a change of heart on female suffrage. In 1904 he voted in favour of extending existing franchise rights to women on an equal basis.[16] However his support for some female suffrage was undermined by the actions of the suffragettes, who disrupted his election meetings in 1906, 1908 and 1910. He responded by denouncing their tactics as undemocratic.[17] Churchill observed that 'the frenzy of a few' was no substitute for the 'earnest convictions' of millions.[18] He described the 1910 Female Suffrage Bill as 'anti-democratic' because it proposed to enfranchise propertied women rather than wage earners. He preferred to enfranchise either a proportion of women from all classes or all adults over twenty-five.[19]

When Churchill became a Liberal, he also became an outspoken critic of the House of Lords. As a young Tory, he had shewn no partiality for peers as politicians, but he had regarded the House of Lords as a bulwark of the constitution.[20] In 1904, by contrast, he complained that the Lords had become 'the merest utensil of the Carlton Club'.[21] When the peers rejected the Liberal Education Bill,

[10] *Parl. Deb*. 4th series, 89 (1901), 409.
[11] Consuelo Balsan, *The Glitter and the Gold* (1953), 103.
[12] *Parl. Deb*., 4th series, 150 (1905), 363–6.
[13] Churchill, *Speeches*, I, 538: Manchester, 8 Jan. 1906.
[14] Churchill, *Speeches*, I, 396: Newcastle, 5 Dec. 1904.
[15] Churchill, *Speeches*, II, 1158 : Nottingham 29 Jan. 1909.
[16] *Parl. Deb*., 4th series, 131 (1904), 1366.
[17] Churchill, *Speeches*, I, 530: Cheetham, 5 January 1906.
[18] Churchill, *Speeches*, I, 1335: Dundee, 18 Oct. 1909.
[19] *Parl. Deb*., 5th series, 19 (1910), 224.
[20] Randolph Churchill, *Churchill*: *Companion*, I, part 2, 698: Winston Churchill to Lady Randolph Churchill, 4 Nov. 1896; Churchill, *Speeches*, I, 44: Shaw, 28 June 1899.
[21] *The Times*, 22 Oct. 1904.

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Churchill denounced the hereditary composition, landed character and partisan politics of the Lords. He counselled the Liberals to pass 'one or two good Radical Budgets', create new peers and 'educate the country on the constitutional issues involved' before they confronted the Lords.[22] The Lords' rejection of the 1909 Budget incensed Churchill who believed that 'the whole foundation of democratic life depended on the control of the finances being wielded by the House of Commons'.[23] He claimed that the past prominence of hereditary peers merely reflected the extent to which power had been engrossed by a 'small, limited and unrepresentative class'.[24] Churchill wrote to Asquith early in 1911:

> We ought to go straight ahead with the Parliament Bill & carry it to the Lords at the earliest date compatible with full discussion. We ought as early as possible to make it clear that we are not a bit afraid of creating 5000 peers – if necessary ... our representatives would be far more capable & determined politicians than the Tory nobles.[25]

When the Parliament Bill was introduced, Churchill declared that as the nation advanced, the influence and control of the peers should be reduced.[26]

The passage of the Parliament Bill precipitated a new crisis over Irish home rule. Churchill gradually abandoned his opposition to home rule after he became a Liberal and from 1908 he supported it on broadly democratic grounds. Speaking in 1912, on the Home Rule Bill, he stated that the great majority of the Irish people had a right to a parliament of their own. He acknowledged 'the perfectly genuine apprehensions of the majority of the people of north-east Ulster', but denied that they had the right 'to resist an Act of Parliament which they dislike'.[27] He regarded the Unionists' threats to prevent home rule as a challenge to democracy:

> This will be the issue – whether civil and Parliamentary government in these realms is to be beaten down by the menace of armed force ... It is the old battle-ground of English history ... From the language which is employed it would almost seem that we are face to face with a disposition on the part of some sections of the proprietary

[22] Churchill, *Speeches*, I, 717: Manchester, 4 Feb. 1907.
[23] Churchill, *Speeches*, II, 1393: Bolton, 7 Dec. 1909.
[24] *The Times*, 18 Dec. 1909.
[25] Randolph Churchill, *Churchill*: *Companion*, II, part 2 (1969), 1031: Winston Churchill to Asquith, 3 Jan. 1911.
[26] *Parl. Deb.*, 5th series, 21 (1911), 2029.
[27] *Parl. Deb.*, 5th series, 37 (1912), 1719.

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> classes to subvert Parliamentary government and to challenge all the civil and constitutional foundations of society.[28]

Churchill denounced the self-styled 'party of law and order' for acting above the law and setting a bad example to the British democracy 'millions of whom are … repeatedly urged to be patient under their misfortune until Parliament has the time to deal with their problems'.[29] Churchill's condemnation of the Unionists for undermining parliamentary goverment paralleled his contemporary criticisms of the suffragettes, syndicalists and anarchists and was a precedent for his later stance towards other groups who believed in direct, as opposed to parliamentary action.

In 1912 Churchill was moved by reports of heroic self-sacrifice during the sinking of the Titanic:

> The whole episode fascinates me. It shows that in spite of all the inequalities and artificialities of our modern life, at the bottom – tested to its foundations, our civilisation is humane, Christian, & absolutely democratic.[30]

Churchill's faith in the democratic spirit of the age was reinforced by a much greater tragedy – the outbreak of the First World War:

> It is well that the democratic nations of the world – the nations … where the peoples own the Government and not the Government the people – should realise what is at stake. The French, English and American systems of government by popular election and Parliamentary debate … are brought into direct conflict with the highly efficient imperialist bureacracy and military organization of Prussia. That is the issue … no sophistry can obscure it.[31]

Germany, however, was more democratic than Russia with whom Britain and France were allied during the war. Consequently Churchill welcomed the Russian revolution of February 1917 as a victory for democracy which strengthened the Allied cause:

> All the countries whose Governments owned the people, as if they were a kind of cattle, are on one side, and the countries where the people owned the Government, which are controlled by free citizens acting through Parliamentary institutions, and based on popular

[28] Churchill, *Speeches*, III, 2230: Bradford, 14 March 1914.

[29] *Parl. Deb.*, 5th series, 61 (1914), 1577.

[30] *Speaking for Themselves: The Personal Letters of Winston and Clementine Churchill*, ed. Mary Soames (1998), 65: Winston to Clementine, 20 April 1912.

[31] Churchill, *Speeches*, III, 2236: press release, 29 August 1914.

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> elections, are on the other … Governments must never again own the people in any part of the world.[32]

In 1918 Churchill hailed the Armistice as an ideological, as well as a military, victory: 'We have beaten the Germans not only out of their trenches. We have beaten them out of their political system.'[33] Britain's own democratic credentials had been strengthened by the 1918 Reform Act which nearly tripled the electorate and enfranchised women over thirty. Churchill played no part in this reform and wrote before the 1918 general election:

> The only uncertain element is the great one, this enormous electorate composed of so many of the poorest people in the country. I am pretty confident, however, that we shall secure very large majorities indeed.[34]

His confidence was justified and this bolstered his faith in democracy. In 1919 he boasted to MPs: 'We are elected on the widest franchise obtaining in any country in the world.'[35]

The interwar years provide the acid test of Churchill's commitment to democracy. His strong opposition to the Russian Bolsheviks, British Socialists and nationalists in the empire, together with his return to the Conservatives, led many Left-leaning contemporaries to question his commitment to democracy. For example, David Low, the political cartoonist, wrote of Churchill in the early 1920s: 'A democrat? An upholder of democracy? Um-ah-yes … when he was leading it. Impatient with it when he was not.'[36] This view has been implicitly endorsed by many historians like Maurice Cowling, who argued that Churchill, after the First World War, abandoned 'the rhetoric of progress for the rhetoric of resistance'.[37] In fact, Churchill's political ideology remained essentially the same as it had been before the war – what changed was the political context, both at home and abroad, in which he operated.

Churchill's hostility to the Bolsheviks was prompted mainly by his distaste for their undemocratic and violent methods. He wrote to a Dundee constituent in December 1918:

> With regard to Russia, you have only to seek the truth to be assured of the awful forms of anti-democratic tyranny which prevail there

[32] Churchill, *Speeches*, III, 2562: Dundee 21 July 1917.
[33] *Ibid.*, 2643: Dundee, 26 Nov. 1918.
[34] Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill* (hereafter Gilbert, *Churchill*: *Companion*), IV, part 1 (1977), 429: Winston Churchill to Clementine Churchill, 27 Nov. 1918.
[35] *Parl. Deb.*, 5th series, Commons, 114 (1919), c. 1254.
[36] David Low, *Low's Autobiography* (1956), 146.
[37] Maurice Cowling, *The Impact of Labour 1920–24* (1971), 166.

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> ... The only sure foundation for a State is a Government freely elected by millions of people, and as many millions as possible. It is fatal to swerve from that conception.[38]

In 1920 Churchill denounced Lenin and Trotsky because they had dissolved the Russian parliament and established an autocratic regime which was not 'fit company for a democratic government like ours'.[39] He declared that his hatred of the Bolsheviks was founded, not on their 'silly system of economics' or 'absurd doctrine of ... equality', but on their 'bloody and devasting terrorism'.[40]

Churchill's critique of Bolshevism had more force than many of his radical contemporaries were prepared to admit, but it led him to favour one anti-Commmunist who was hardly a democrat. On a visit to Rome, in 1927, Churchill praised Mussolini:

> Your movement has abroad rendered a service to the whole world. The greatest fear that ever tormented every Democratic or Socialist leader was that of being outbid or surpassed by some other leader more extreme than himself. It has been said that a continual movement to the Left, a kind of fatal landslide towards the abyss, has been the character of all revolutions. Italy ... provides the necessary antidote to the Russian virus.[41]

Churchill's comments were partly prompted by the need for good Anglo-Italian relations, but he clearly preferred Italy to be Fascist, rather than Communist.[42] His stance reflected the new ideological polarity in Europe, but it also echoed a personal concern which he had first voiced thirty years before. In his only novel, *Savrola*, written in 1896, Churchill traced, in his own words, 'the fortunes of a liberal leader who overthrew an arbitrary Government only to be swallowed up by a socialist revolution'.[43] His early fear that the principal threat to democracy came from the Left, not the Right, was later reinforced by the Bolshevik revolution. Nevertheless Churchill, in his Rome speech, stressed that Britain had a very different way from Mussolini of dealing with Bolshevism and when he returned home, he declared that *all* forms of tyranny – aristocratic, theocratic, plutocratic, bureaucratic, democratic – were equally odious.[44]

Churchill's postwar Irish policy was broadly consistent with his

[38] Winston S. Churchill, *The Aftermath* (1941), 48–9.
[39] Churchill, *Speeches*, III, 2937–8: Dundee, 14 Feb. 1920.
[40] *Parl. Deb.* 5th series, 131 (1920), 1728.
[41] Churchill, *Speeches*, IV, 4126: Rome, 20 January 1927.
[42] A point Churchill later acknowledged in 1944, see: *Parl. Deb.*, 5th series, 406 (1944), 938.
[43] Winston S. Churchill, *My Early Life* (1943), 169.
[44] Churchill, *Speeches*, IV, 4213: Albert Hall, 6 May 1927.

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prewar democratic stance. He wrote to Lloyd George in 1918: 'I have always shared your view that home rule should be give to that part of Ireland which so earnestly desires it and cannot be forced upon that which at present distrusts it.'[45]

The IRA's subsequent campaign against the British authorities aroused Churchill's usual pugnacity and hostility to political violence. Nevertheless – as Paul Addison has pointed out – Churchill neither initiated, nor sought to prolong, British coercion in Ireland which he regarded as a prelude to a settlement, not an alternative to one.[46] He accepted the right of the Ulster Unionists to decide their own fate, but he continued to hope for the re-union of Ireland within the British Empire.[47]

In Britain, Churchill's postwar objective was to forge a progressive alliance between what he called 'the democratic forces in the Conservative party and the patriotic forces in the Liberal and Labour parties'.[48] He justified the continuance of Lloyd George's coalition government by referring to his father's call for a Tory democratic government animated by liberal ideas.[49] After the fall of the coalition, in 1923, he told Sir Robert Horne:

> I am what I have always been – a Tory Democrat. Force of circumstance has compelled me to serve with another party but my views have never changed and I should be glad to give effect to them by rejoining the Conservatives.[50]

In 1924 Churchill called for Conservative co-operation with 'a Liberal wing on the lines of 1886' which would 'afford the nation the guarantee it requires against retrogression'.[51] At the 1924 general election, Churchill stood as a 'Constitutionalist' candidate for Epping. In his election address he compared his position to that of the Liberal Unionists in 1886 and also observed:

> I am entirely opposed to minority rule … the will of the majority … is the only healthy foundation of the State … 'Trust the people!' These words of Lord Randolph Churchill … embody and express the fundamental principles of British national life and government.[52]

[45] Gilbert, *Churchill*: *Companion*, IV, part 1, 411: Churchill to Lloyd George, 9 Nov. 1918.
[46] Paul Addison, 'The Search for Peace in Ireland', in *Churchill as Peacemaker* ed. James W. Muller (Cambridge, 1997), 197–202.
[47] For a wider consideration of Churchill's Irish policy see Mary C. Bromage, *Churchill and Ireland* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1964).
[48] Churchill, *Speeches*, III, 2816: London, 15 July 1919.
[49] *Ibid.*, 2816–7.
[50] Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, V (1976), 8: Riddell's diary, 30 May 1923.
[51] *The Times*, 8 March 1924.
[52] *The Times*, 13 Oct. 1924.

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After the election, Churchill joined Baldwin's new Conservative government as Chancellor of the Exchequer. In 1925 he concluded a major speech to the Primrose League, by endorsing his father's belief in 'Government of the people, for the people, by the people'.[53]

The postwar rise of Labour did not undermine Churchill's faith in democracy, partly because he had prewar experience of confronting Labour. He had personally been opposed by Labour candidates at every election since 1908 and his opposition to socialism went back even further. In 1906 he had claimed that moderate Liberalism enlisted 'hundreds of thousands upon the side of progress and popular democratic reform whom militant socialism would drive into violent Tory reaction.'[54] In 1908 he had stressed the fundamental dichotomy between Liberal and socialist principles – a view which he re-stated in 1922: 'Socialism is the negation of every principle of British Liberalism'.[55] In the same speech he observed:

> There never was a Government yet erected that would own the people as a Socialist government would. No Tsar, no Kaiser, no Oriental potentate has ever wielded powers like these. When the only employer in the country is the state, a strike becomes a rebellion. No strikes therefore can be tolerated.[56]

Nevertheless Churchill did not question the democratic right of the Labour party to seek a majority at the polls.[57] When Ramsay MacDonald formed the first Labour government in 1924, Churchill wrote to congratulate him and received an appreciative reply. Yet Churchill's antipathy to socialism remained as strong as ever and in 1926 he expressed the fear that a future Labour government would try to implement socialism and thus curtail 'our liberty'.[58]

Churchill regarded the General Strike in May 1926 as a threat to democracy because it attempted 'to compel Parliament to do something which it otherwise would not do'. He predicted that the conflict would end either 'in the overthrow of Parliamentary Government or its decisive victory'.[59] After the end of the strike, Churchill declared that 'government by talking … is better than government by shouting and … by shooting'. He denied that 'the age of democracy spells ruin to Parliamentary government' and claimed that parliament was 'the greatest instrument for associating an ever-widening class of citizens

[53] Churchill, *Speeches*, IV, 3592: the Albert Hall, 1 May 1925.
[54] Churchill, *Speeches*, I, 675: Glasgow, 11 Oct. 1906.
[55] *Churchill: Speeches*, I, 146–8: Dundee, 4 May 1908; IV, 3306: Dundee, 8 April 1922.
[56] Churchill, *Speeches*, IV, 3306: Dundee, 8 April 1922.
[57] Churchill, *Speeches*, III, 2943: Dundee, 14 Feb. 1920.
[58] Churchill, *Speeches*, IV, 3821: Bolton, 21 Jan. 1926.
[59] *Parl. Deb.*, 5th series, 195 (1926), 124.

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with the actual life and policy of the State'.[60] Nevertheless Churchill was not keen on extending citizenship to young women. In 1927 he initially opposed the Equal Suffrage Bill because he feared it would harm the Conservative party at the polls, but he later decided to support it 'on the well known principle of making a virtue of necessity'.[61] He declared: 'we must not only trust the people ... but trust the whole people'.[62]

In his 1930 Romanes lecture, Churchill observed that parliamentary government 'seems to lose much of its authority when based upon universal suffrage' and that many European parliaments had been undermined:

> Democracy has shown itself careless about those very institutions by which its own political status has been achieved. It seems ready to yield up the tangible rights hard won in rugged centuries to party organizations, to leagues and societies, to military chiefs or to dictatorships in various forms.[63]

Churchill believed that the British parliament, by contrast, had retained both its power and prestige and provided 'the closest association yet achieved between the life of the people and the action of the State'. Nevertheless he doubted whether, even in Britain, the right economic decisions could be reached by 'institutions based on adult suffrage', since no single political party would adopt necessary, but unpopular, economic policies for fear of their electoral consequences. Consequently he recommended the creation of a subordinate 'Economic parliament' made up of businessmen and technocrats.[64]

The financial crisis of 1931 confirmed Churchill's fears about the limitations of modern democracies:

> Democracy as a guide or motive to progress has long been known to be incompetent. None of the legislative assemblies of the great modern states represent in universal suffrage even a fraction of the strength or wisdom of the community ... Democratic governments drift along the line of least resistance, taking short views, paying their way with sops and doles ... Never was there less continuity or design in their affairs, and yet towards them are coming swiftly changes which will revolutionize for good or ill not only the whole economic

[60] Churchill, *Speeches*, IV, 3968–9: Westminster, 26 May 1926.

[61] Gilbert, *Churchill: Companion*, V, part 1 (1979), 958–60: Churchill's Cabinet memorandum, 'The Question of extending Female Suffrage', 8 March 1927. *Speaking for Themselves*, 315: Winston to Clementine, 22 Oct. 1927.

[62] Churchill, *Speeches*, IV. 4333: Chingford, 24 Oct. 1927.

[63] Winston S. Churchill, 'Parliamentary Government and the Economic Problem', in *Thoughts and Adventures* (1942), 194.

[64] *Ibid.*, 196–203.

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> structure of the world but the social habits and moral outlook of every family.[65]

Churchill's comments reflected contemporary dissatisfaction – on the left, as well as on the right – with parliamentary party politics. This feeling encouraged Ramsay MacDonald to form, in August 1931, a coalition national government. Churchill, like his father before him, favoured the concept of a national government, but he was excluded from its ranks. Nevertheless he welcomed the national government's landslide victory at the polls, on the grounds that 'universal suffrage has sent the largest majority of Tory members to Parliament which has ever been dreamed of'.[66] By 1934, however, Churchill had concluded that the dominance of the House of Commons by one party was 'most unhealthy'. He advocated constitutional changes including a 'weighted' franchise with extra votes for heads of households and fathers of families and the creation of 'a strong and effective Second Chamber' able 'to keep the main structure of our national life beyond the danger of sudden and violent change'.[67]

Churchill's opposition, in the early 1930s, to the Government of India Bill reflected his belief that Asia was unsuited to democracy. As a young officer in India, he had observed: 'East of Suez democratic reins are impossible. India must be governed on old principles.'[68] But Churchill did not believe that India should be governed in an arbitrary or coercive way. In 1920 he endorsed the enforced retirement of General Dyer after the Amritsar Massacre and observed:

> Our reign in India or anywhere else has never stood on the basis of physical force alone and it would be fatal to the British Empire if we were to try to base ourselves only upon it.[69]

In 1931 Churchill opposed the Indian policy of MacDonald's government because it was proposed to transfer many British responsibilities to 'an electorate comparatively small and almost entirely illiterate'. He claimed that the Congress party represented the elite Brahmins who 'spout the principles of western Liberalism and democracy, but . . . deny basic human rights to the 60 million untouchables'.[70] Churchill preferred the Indian government to be responsible to Westminster which he considered was 'the most democratic parliament in the world.'[71]

[65] Churchill, 'Fifty Years Hence', in *Thoughts*, 236.
[66] Churchill, *Speeches*, v, 5089: Chingford, 30 October 1931.
[67] *Ibid*, 5319–20: Broadcast, 16 Jan. 1934. *Parl. Deb.*, 5th series, 253 (1931), 102–6.
[68] Churchill, *Churchill: Companion*, i, part 2, 751: Churchill to Lady Randolph Churchill, 6 April 1897.
[69] *Parl. Deb.*, 5th series, 131 (1920), 1731.
[70] Churchill, *Speeches*, v, 5007: Albert Hall, 18 March 1931.
[71] Churchill, *Speeches*, v, 4986: Epping, 23 Feb 1931.

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Churchill's doubts about democracy in India were increased by the failure of democracy in much of Europe. He claimed that the supporters of Congress had been influenced by 'all those books about democracy which Europe is now beginning increasingly to discard'.[72] In 1935 he described the proposals contained in the Government of India Bill as the 'faded flowers of Victorian Liberalism which, however admirable in themselves, have nothing to do with Asia and are being universally derided and discarded throughout the continent of Europe'.[73] Churchill's reservations were shared by some maharajahs and members of the orthodox Hindu society, Varnashrama Swarajya, who believed that western democracy was unsuited to Indian traditions.[74]

Churchill's reluctance to apply democratic principles to India contrasted with his readiness to deplore the lack of them in Nazi Germany. Soon after Hitler became chancellor, Churchill observed that German parliamentary democracy, which had been a security for Europe after the First World War, had been replaced by a dictatorship characterised by militarism and anti-semitism.[75] In 1934 he pointed out that the Nazi government was free from 'those very important restraints which a democratic Parliament and constitutional system impose upon any executive Government'.[76] He feared that the apparent success of the Nazi regime posed a threat to the continuance of democracy throughout western Europe:

> We have to consider ... whether the Parliamentary Governments of Western Europe ... are going to be able to afford to their subjects the same measure of physical security, to say nothing of national satisfaction, as is being afforded to the people of Germany by the dictatorship which has been established there.[77]

Nevertheless Churchill continued to regard the Communists, as well as the Nazis, as a threat to democracy. At Paris, in 1936, he welcomed the opposition of the French, British and American democracies to both the Nazis and Communists. His speech was applauded as a 'magnificent defence of democracy'.[78] Churchill feared that in Spain, where civil war had broken out, the Communists were waiting to seize

[72] *Ibid.*

[73] *Parl. Deb.*, 5th series, 302 (1935), 1921.

[74] Winston S. Churchill, Chartwell Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge (hereafter Churchill Papers), CHAR: 2/193/41–45: Stanley Bratle to Churchill, 15 April 1933; 2/123/163–7: Maharajah of Alwar to Churchill 19 July 1922; 2/189/123: cutting from *The Times*, 22 Nov. 1932.

[75] *Parl. Deb.*, 5th series, 276 (1933), 2790.

[76] *Parl. Deb.*, 5th series, 286 (1934), 2071–2.

[77] *Parl. Deb.*, 5th series, 302 (1935), 1496.

[78] Churchill, *Speeches*, VI. 5788: Paris, 24 September 1936; Churchill Papers, CHAR 2/258/79: Arthur Cummings to Churchill, 24 Sept. 1936.

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power as they had done in Russia in 1917. He did not, however, endorse Franco's revolt against the Republican government for he believed that 'whoever wins in Spain, freedom and free democracy must be the losers'.[79] By the end of 1938 Churchill was more favourable to the republican cause because he thought that the influence of the Communists and anarchists had waned. He feared that if Franco won he would practise 'the same kind of brutal suppressions as are practised in the Totalitarian States'.[80]

In the late 1930s it was President Roosevelt, rather than Churchill, who led the rhetorical campaign in the English-speaking world against the European dictators.[81] The president's peace initiative in 1938 inspired Churchill to issue his own call to the transatlantic democracies:

> Have we not an ideology – if we must use this ugly word – of our own in freedom, in a liberal constitution, in democratic and Parliamentary government … Ought we not to produce in defence of Right, champions as bold, missionaries as eager, and if need be, swords as sharp as are at the disposal of the leaders of totalitarian states.[82]

After the Munich agreement, Churchill claimed that the ideological antagonism between Nazidom and democracy strengthened the free world.[83] In April 1939 Churchill again echoed Roosevelt's recent defence of democracy by citing the British legacy of Magna Carta, Habeas Corpus, the Petition of Right, trial by jury, the English Common Law and parliamentary democracy.[84]

Churchill opposed Chamberlain's appeasement policy partly because he feared that it would undermine democracy in Britain:

> I foresee and foretell that the policy of submission will carry with it restrictions upon the freedom of speech and debate in Parliament, on public platforms, and discussions in the Press, for it will be said … that we cannot allow the Nazi system of dictatorship to be critcised by ordinary, common English politicians.[85]

This fear had some foundation for Churchill's attack on the Munich

[79] Winston S. Churchill, *Step By Step* (1939), 51–2: 'The Spanish Tragedy, August 10, 1936'.

[80] *Ibid.*, 313: 'The Spanish Ulcer, December 30, 1938'.

[81] For a comparison between Churchill and Roosevelt's comments on democracy see: Roland Quinault 'Anglo-American Attitudes to Democracy from Lincoln to Churchill' in *Anglo-American Attitudes: From Revolution to Partnership*, ed. Fred M. Leventhal and Roland Quinault (Aldershot, 2000), 132–6.

[82] Winston S. Churchill, *Into Battle: War Speeches* (1945), 17–18: Manchester, 9 May 1938.

[83] Churchill, *Battle*, 58: broadcast to the USA, 16 Oct. 1938.

[84] Churchill, *Battle*, 100: London, 20 April 1939.

[85] *Parl. Deb.*, 5th series, 339 (1938), 371.

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agreement led to calls for him to be disowned by his constituency association. But Churchill warned that parliamentary democracy would not survive if the constituencies returned subservient MPs and tried to stamp out independent judgement.[86]

When Churchill entered the Cabinet, at the outbreak of war in 1939, he called for tough measures which would convince the world that the democracies were more than a match for the dicatorships.[87] Throughout the war he remained convinced that democracy was on trial as much as dictatorship. In 1942 he told Roosevelt: 'Democracy has to prove that it can provide a granite foundation for war against tyranny.'[88] Yet Churchill's famous speeches in the summer of 1940 employed the old language of freedom, rather than the new language of democracy. Thereafter Churchill's use of specifically democratic rhetoric was constrained by contradictory pressures from Britain's two major allies. In 1941 Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union provided Churchill with a welcome ally but undermined the democratic credentials of the anti-Nazi front. Soon afterwards, Churchill and Roosevelt signed the Atlantic Charter which, although it asserted the right of people to choose their own form of government, made no reference to democracy. This prevented embarrassment not only for the Soviet Union, but also for imperial Britain. When the US entered the war, Roosevelt privately called on Churchill to give independence to India, but he refused to consider the matter until after the war was over.[89] In 1944 Churchill even told Roosevelt that British imperialism 'has spread and is spreading democracy more widely than any other system of government since the beginning of time'.[90]

Churchill's most important wartime statement on democracy was made in opposition, not to the Nazis, but to the Communists. In December 1944 he defended British intervention in Greece and other parts of liberated Europe as action designed to ensure the rule of democracy, which he defined as free and secret voting for the candidate of one's choice. He claimed that throughout his life he had 'broadly' stood 'upon the foundation of free elections based on universal suffrage'. He accused the Communists of creating 'a swindle democracy … which calls itself democracy because it is Left Wing':

[86] Churchill, *Battle*, 78: Waltham Abbey, 14 March 1939.
[87] Churchill, *Battle*, 133–4: broadcast, 1 October 1939.
[88] CHAR 20/70/79–80: Churchill to Roosevelt, 20 Feb. 1942.
[89] Lord Moran, *Winston Churchill: The Struggle for Survival 1940–65* (1966), 30–1.
[90] Warren F. Kimball (ed.), *Churchill & Roosevelt: The Complete Correspondence III. Alliance Declining February 1944–April 1945* (Princeton, 1987), 140: Churchill to Roosevelt, 21 May 1944.

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> Democracy ... is not based on violence or terrorism, but on reason, on fair play, on freedom, on respecting the rights of other people. Democracy is no harlot to be picked up in the street by a man with a tommy gun. I trust the people, the mass of the people, in almost every country, but I like to make sure that it is the people and not a gang of bandits ... who think that by violence they can overturn constituted authority, in some cases ancient Parliaments, Governments and States.[91]

The end of the war in Europe led Churchill to fear a renewed threat to democracy at home. The break-up of the coalition government led to a return to party politics and a general election at which Churchill re-issued a warning he had made twenty years before. He denounced socialism as a threat to liberty in Britain – 'the cradle and citadel of free democracy throughout the world' – and he even suggested that a Labour government would have to rely on some sort of gestapo.[92] Nevertheless he accepted Labour's landslide victory at the polls:

> I avow my faith in Democracy, whatever course or view it may take with individuals and parties. They may make their mistakes and they may profit from their mistakes. Democracy is now on trial as it never was before, and in these islands we must uphold it, as we upheld it in the dark days of 1940 and 1941 ... While the war was on and all the Allies were fighting for victory, the word 'Democracy', like many people, had to work overtime, but now that peace has come we must search for more precise definitions.[93]

In 1946, in his famous Fulton speech, Churchill laid down the general principle that 'the people of any country have the right and should have the power by constitutional action, by free unfettered elections, with secret ballot, to choose or change the character or form of government under which they dwell'. He was mainly concerned with the lack of democracy behind the 'Iron Curtain' in Eastern Europe, but his exhortation to the British and American peoples to 'practise what we preach' implied that they should also defend democracy at home.[94] Later that year, Churchill denounced Socialist state control in Britain by an 'aristocracy of privileged officials' and in its place advocated 'a property-owning democracy'.[95] In 1947 Churchill criticised

[91] *Parl. Deb.*, 5th series, 406 (1944), 927–8.

[92] Winston S. Churchill, *Victory: War Speeches* (1946), 188–9: election broadcast, 4 June 1945.

[93] *Parl. Deb.*, 5th series, 413 (1945), 86.

[94] Winston S. Churchill, *The Sinews of Peace: Post-War Speeches* (1948), 97: Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri, 5 March 1946.

[95] *Ibid.*, 214: Conservative Party Conference, 5 Oct. 1946.

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the 'we are the masters now' mentality of the Labour government:

> Democracy is not a caucus, obtaining a fixed term of office by promises, and then doing what it likes with the people. We hold that there ought to be a constant relationship between the rulers and the people. Government of the people, by the people, for the people still remains the sovereign definition of democracy. There is no correspondence between this broad conception and the outlook of His Majesty's Government.[96]

Churchill thus linked Labour with an unfavourable image of American democracy: government by caucus.

At the 1950 general election, Labour was returned to power with a narrow parliamentary majority, although it received fewer votes than the combined total for Conservatives and Liberals. This led Churchill to favour proportional representation which he had first endorsed in 1931 – when Labour had also been in office.[97] In 1950 he drew the attention of parliament to the 'constitutional injustice' whereby 2,600,000 Liberal voters had returned only nine MPs.[98] But his call for a select committee on electoral reform attracted no support from Tory backbenchers.[99] Churchill was also out of step with many Tories in his attitude to reform of the House of Lords. During the debate on the 1947 Parliament Bill, he reminded the House that he had actively supported the 1911 Parliament Act, but he attacked the new Bill because it retained the hereditary peers instead of introducing fundamental reform.[100] In 1952 Lord Salisbury noted that Churchill regarded the Lords 'as a rather disreputable collection of old gentlemen'.[101] When Churchill retired from the premiership, he refused a peerage and in 1961 he supported Anthony Wedgwood Benn's attempt to renounce his peerage and retain his seat in the Commons, which led to the 1963 Peerage Act.[102]

Churchill disliked the hereditary character of the House of Lords, but he regarded the elected House of Commons as 'the enduring guarantee of British liberties and democratic progress'. In 1953 he told MPs: 'We are not only a democracy but a Parliamentary democracy, and both aspects of our political life must be borne in mind.' He even

[96] *Parl. Deb.*, 5th series, 444 (1947), 203.
[97] *Parl. Deb.*, 5th series, 253 (1931), 102–6.
[98] *Parl. Deb.*, 5th series, 472 (1950), 143–4.
[99] Stuart Ball (ed.), *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Churchill and Attlee: The Headlam Diaries 1935–1951*, Camden Fifth Series, vol. 14 (Cambridge, 1999), 622–3: diary entries for 7 and 9 March 1950.
[100] *Parl. Deb.*, 5th series, 444 (1947), 202.
[101] Moran, *Struggle for Survival*, 376: diary entry for 22 Feb. 1952.
[102] Winston Churchill, *Letter to Anthony Wedgwood Benn* (Bristol, 1961). See also Tony Benn's comments in the 'Churchill Remembered' section.

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claimed 'that elections exist for the sake of the House of Commons and not that the House of Commons exists for the sake of elections'.[103] He regarded himself as the servant of the House of Commons and he opposed the American system which separated the executive from the legislature.[104]

During his second premiership, Churchill was still reluctant to extend democracy to the non-white population of the British Empire, particularly in Africa. In 1954 he observed to Eisenhower:

> I am a bit sceptical about universal suffrage for the Hottentots even if refined by proportional representation. The British and American Democracies were slowly and painfully forged and even they are not perfect yet.[105]

Churchill's reference to the Hottentots echoed an 1886 speech by Lord Salisbury, who had argued that majority government could not be safely conferred on Hottentots, Indians or other non-Teutonic peoples.[106] Churchill was sceptical, not without reason, whether democracy could operate effectively in countries where there were high levels of poverty and illiteracy and no tradition of mass participation in institutional politics. Nevertheless he did not rule out democratisation in the colonies if the conditions were right. Indeed in 1953 British Guiana was given a constitution based on universal suffrage, although it was soon suspended after disturbances broke out. In the same year the possibility of giving autonomy to the Gold Coast was also considered, although Jock Colville doubted if Churchill was interested 'in the inhabitants of those parts'.[107] Churchill's preference for gradual democratisation reflected his historical perspective. His remark to Eisenhower about the slow and imperfect emergence of democracy in Britain and America was fully justified. Britain had only recently adopted a one person one value franchise and still retained an hereditary monarchy and second chamber, whilst in the USA many non-whites were still disenfranchised.

In 1914 Churchill expressed the hope that he had 'a firm grip of democratic principles'.[108] How justified was this claim with respect to his career as a whole? Churchill's commitment, in principle, to democracy in Britain never wavered, even in the interwar years. He always

[103] *Parl. Deb.*, 5th series, 520 (1953), 21–2.

[104] Winston S. Churchill, *The Unrelenting Struggle: War Speeches* (1942), 334: 29 December 1941; Sir John Colville, *Parliamentary Democracy: History and Practice* (Toronto, 1986), 7–10.

[105] Anthony Montague Browne, *Long Sunset: Memoirs of Winston Churchill's Last Private Secretary* (1996), 164.

[106] *The Times*, 17 May 1886: Salisbury's speech at St James's Hall, 15 May.

[107] Moran Diaries, 434: 14 July 1953.

[108] *Churchill: Speeches*, III, 2232 : Bradford, 14 March 1914.

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believed that the fundamental source of political authority was the will of the people expressed through the medium of free and secret parliamentary elections. However Churchill's commitment, in practice, to democracy in Britain was less impressive than his rhetoric. Although he supported the principle of manhood suffrage, he did little to advance its implementation. He quickly accepted the principle of women's suffrage, but he opposed female franchise bills both before and after the First World War. Moreover Churchill was not entirely committed to an equal franchise. Montague Browne noted Churchill's interest, in the 1950s, in schemes for cumulative votes for heads of families and others with special responsibilites, but thought that he did not seriously wish to put them into practice.[109] However Churchill had also proposed such schemes in the 1930s, which suggests that he had a fairly serious interest in them.

Churchill often expressed reservations about democracy. He did so, not only in the early 1930s – when democracy was being undermined by economic and political developments – but also after the Second World War when western democracy had triumphed. In 1947 he called democracy 'the worst form of Government except all those others that have been tried'.[110] He thought that democracy was riddled with faults and dangers, and a perpetual popularity contest, though it was still better than alternative systems.[111]

It is tempting to ascribe Churchill's reservations about democracy to his ancestral Conservatism. Sir John Colville noted that Churchill was a strange mixture of radical and traditionalist and in that respect, he resembled his father, Lord Randolph, who had wished, in Winston's words, to reconcile 'the old glories … of King and country … with modern democracy'.[112] Winston certainly saw no contradiction between democracy and monarchy. In 1943 he approved the marriage of the exiled King of Yugoslavia on the grounds that it would give him a chance of perpetuating his dynasty and then added, incongruously, 'are we not fighting this war for liberty and democracy?'[113] Yet Churchill's belief that monarchy and democracy were compatible was based on more than just Conservatism. His hope, at the end of the Spanish Civil War, that the restoration of a constitutional monarchy would end old emnities was vindicated by events after Franco's death.[114]

Churchill's reservations about democracy stemmed not just from his

[109] Browne, *Long Sunset*, 180.
[110] *Parl. Deb.*, 5th series, 444 (1947), 207.
[111] Browne, *Long Sunset*, 180.
[112] John Colville, *The Fringes of Power*, 128; Churchill, *Thoughts and Adventures*, 42.
[113] Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, v: *Closing The Ring* (1952), 571–2: Churchill to the Foreign Secretary, 11 July 1943.
[114] Churchill, *Step By Step*, 334: 'Hope in Spain, 23 February 1939'.

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Conservatism, but also from his Liberalism. In 1906 he noted that the 1884 Reform Act had been followed by twenty years of Tory ascendancy:

> Who could possibly have foreseen that … enfranchised multitudes would constitute themselves the buttresses of privilege and property; that a free press would by its freedom sap the influence of debate and through its prosperity become the implement of wealth; that members and constituencies would become less independent, not more independent; that Ministers would become more powerful, not less powerful; that the march would be ordered backward along the beaten track, not forward in some new direction …[115]

Churchill was a Liberal when he wrote this comment, but he made similar remarks in the 1930s when he was a Conservative.

Churchill also feared that democracy could breed jingoism and war. In 1901 he observed: 'Democracy is more vindictive than Cabinets. The wars of peoples will be more terrible than those of kings.'[116] In 1947, in an imagined conversation with his father, he said: 'We have had nothing else but wars since democracy took charge.'[117] This was ironic because Churchill believed that peace was the only secure foundation for democracy. In 1906 he observed that 'the first indispensable condition of democratic progress must be the maintenance of European peace'.[118] This conviction underlay his support for European unity both before and after the Second World War. In 1947 he declared: 'The whole purpose of a united democratic Europe is to give decisive guarantees against aggression.'[119]

Churchill's anti-Socialism, which tarnished his reputation as a democrat in the eyes of the Left, reflected his Liberalism more than his Conservatism. His belief that socialism was an inherently illiberal political system may seem excessive in retrospect, but it was borne out, during his lifetime, in half of Europe and much of the rest of the world. Even in postwar Britain, the growth of the socialistic state alarmed not just the Right, but also moderate Labour politicians like Roy Jenkins. Today, by contrast, New Labour in Britain and the new socialists in Europe have rejected the full-blooded socialism which Churchill so strongly mistrusted.

Churchill's reputation as a democrat was also undermined by his reluctance to democratise Britian's non-white empire. But his stance

[115] Churchill, *Lord Randolph Churchill*, 219.

[116] *Parl. Deb.*, 4th series, 93 (1901), 1572.

[117] Winston Churchill, 'The Dream', in Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, VIII (1988), 369.

[118] Churchill, *Speeches*, I, 671: Glasgow, 11 Oct. 1906.

[119] Winston S. Churchill, *Europe Unite: Speeches 1947 and 1948* (1950), 83: Albert Hall, 14 May 1947.

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on this issue was shared by most of his parliamentary contemporaries including many Liberals and some socialists.[120] His attitude was based mainly on pragmatic considerations of culture, wealth, class, education and stability rather than on racial prejudice, for even in Britain Churchill only favoured a gradual 'levelling up' to full democracy. Nevertheless Churchill's stalwart defence of democracy during the Second World War strengthened the post-war demand for democracy throughout the Empire.

Churchill's attitude to democracy was essentially late-Victorian in character. He favoured a democracy which was evolutionary, not revolutionary; parliamentary, not plebiscitary; monarchical, not republican, liberal not socialist. His outlook was indelibly influenced by his father's concept of Tory democracy which, in turn, drew on the Victorian Liberal tradition of Gladstone and Mill. Like them, Churchill trusted 'the people' but was not entirely committed to electoral equality and believed that legislation and administration should be in the hands of those able to lead. Churchill had great confidence in his own abilities in this respect and one of his favourite definitions of democracy was 'the association of us all through the leadership of the best'.[121] However Churchill never forgot that he was a representative of the people. On his eightieth birthday – at the height of his fame – he modestly observed that it was the British people who had the lion's heart during the war, while he merely had 'the luck to be called upon to give the roar'.[122]

[120] See the comments by Tony Benn MP and Lord Carrington in the 'Churchill Remembered' section.

[121] Winston S. Churchill, *Stemming The Tide: Speeches 1951 and 1952* (1953), 82–3: Glasgow, 18 May 1951.

[122] Winston S. Churchill, *The Unwritten Alliance: Speeches 1953 to 1959* (1961), 203: speech at Westminster Hall, 30 November 1954.

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