

RSOG Seminar:
“Equality and Liberty in Political Democracy”
with
Professor Edgard Van de Velde
Professor of Constitutional, Comparative and European Law & co-author
of “The Road to Political Democracy”

When

28 March 2013

Where

Razak School of Government

Who

Professor Edgard Van de Velde

About The Seminar

Democracy has evolved and matured from its inception in antiquity. This seminar examined positive equality and liberty, which is focused on positive discrimination, financial state support of nascent political initiatives and differentiated education in recognition of specific needs of different social groups. These positive measures bring a large impact on the gradual evolution towards true political democracy. The seminar delved into the issues of long-term inter-generational solidarity and medium-term intra-generational solidarity. Long-term inter-generational solidarity focuses on moderate public debt and sufficient pension fund reserves. On the other hand, medium-term intra-generational solidarity emphasizes maintaining a substantial part of state welfare for the current generations.

Summary

In *The Republic*, Plato postulated that democratic regimes have two main objectives – **equality** and **liberty**. 22 centuries later, English philosopher John Locke reemphasised these objectives as critical in order for States to realise for its citizen the mutual preservation and enhancement of their lives, intellectual liberties, and estates (properties). Liberty and equality is seen with both negative and positive objectives, i.e.:

- Negative liberty: to be free from
- Positive liberty : to become free for
- Negative equality: to be equal to
- Positive equality: to become (more) equal to

The speaker underlines these principles as the methodological starting point to elaborate his thesis that democratic regimes can reduce actual inequality. Balancing equality and liberty is crucial in attaining this. And both must exist. On the other hand, having either one without the other can be fatal for democratic regimes.

The growth of democracy is explained through the enhancement of its four main Aristotelian features – rule by turn, rule of law, education, and the role of the middle class.

Briefly, rule by turn denotes democracy as self-government by citizens as equals. It is a system where the rulers must be able to rule when it is their turn and to obey when they are ruled by their fellows. Rule of law is where all persons (individual and government) are subject to law. This is a condition in order to have a democracy. Education and preponderance of the Middle Class over Rich and Poor are also important elements in the preservation of democracy as both provide the opportunity in balancing and moderating inclusiveness in a democratic regime.

Despite having the pillars spelled out, the speaker asserted that a democratic political regime is probably the most difficult of regimes. Using the pillars and concepts of positive and negative equality and liberty, a democratic matrix is created. This matrix cuts across timelines and indicates contemporary relevancy in identifying components of a democratic regime.

Jean Jacques Rosseau (in 1762) stated dignity is more important than absolute equality; that moderation is crucial in ensuring that no one is rich enough to buy another and too poor that they sell themselves. Dignity, is crucial to Personhood, and democratic regimes can be the vehicle to assure this. According to John Rawls' Theory of Justice (1971), in democratic regimes, even inequality is derived from the principle of equality; that is the poor will be better off even as the rich get richer.

Issues Raised

1. Whilst democracy can have a positive effect on the economy, there are other existing and powerful factors that do the same. The theoretical model presented is part of reality and reality consists of multiple variables. The impact of lobbying and the influence of social media in some countries can be contributing factors to the outcome of a country's economy. As it stands, there are financial players in the world that can outrule any country or even the EU, for that matter. However, it is only if the action is profitable, and in the absence of sufficient regulation.

2. Education is crucial in democracy as it cannot function with an uneducated citizenry. It is the responsibility of the state to maintain a certain standard of excellence in education.
3. The road towards political democracy can be seen as expensive and statist. However, the utilisation of positive and negative aspects of liberty and equality at the rightful intervention is seen as the most apt approach towards attainment of equality.
4. It is argued that excessive wealth that is being wasted is seen as undemocratic as it punishes future generations with the costs that is incurred by the present generation.

About the Speaker

Professor Edgard Van de Velde began his academic career as Assistant-Lecturer in Public and Comparative Constitutional Law upon receiving his Masters and PhD in Public Management Sciences from Law School of the University of Gent. He was appointed as Associate Professor of Constitutional, Comparative, and European Law at EHSAL-Brussels from 1985 until 2008. He was also member of the Cabinet of the Minister for (Belgian) State Reform (1979-1980), and he was Pre-Advisor of the Flemish Parliament for the reform of the federal financial model (1995-1996). He has contributed to professional journals and conferences, and he has (co)-authored several books.

Contact

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