

Uniting the USA? Strong democracy needs good opposition and belief in the system

The President has boldly set as his main aim uniting a fractured and divided USA. He wisely accepts this will not be easy. Too many of his followers seem to think if they just insist more strongly on their views of the world and claim the electoral right to enforce them the country will come together behind a new left wing Democrat settlement. If they reinforce this with tough action against any who disagree, through court cases against certain types of speech and protests, and censorship on media and social media, they will impose a more disciplined conformity on an unruly country.

They need to understand some things about how normally healthy democracies like the USA work. They provide in the constitution for strong opposition to government or Presidential plans. There should always be a good democratic alternative government on offer, that has an alternative view of the more contentious or questionable policies pursued by the incumbents. A great democracy does not have 95% support for what the majority government does. It debates choices and options and exposes the chosen course of government to criticisms. Exercising majority governing power is a constant exercise in persuasion, listening, seeking improvement, compromising with the Opposition when they have a good point. A good Opposition know when to disagree and when to campaign hard against a policy or law. A good government gives ground when it is wrong but does not compromise its main aims, pledges and beliefs.

A successful democracy as the USA usually is has top level agreement between all the democratic parties over two crucial things – the system by which governments make and sell their decisions to elected bodies and the wider public, and the results of free and fair elections. There has to be a belief by the main elected officials that an election produced a fair and accurate result. In opposition parties need to believe they have sensible opportunity to make their case and to seek change peacefully. When the Commons has a government with a decent majority the Opposition accepts that government has a mandate to get through the main business from its Manifesto and from its statements of aim and principle. A good Opposition also makes it difficult every time government stumbles, wanders too far from its promises or principles, or offers incompetence instead of good administration. In the Commons an Opposition can only win a vote by working with governing party MPs who also think on that occasion the government is wrong, which can happen quite often. Opposition is there to question, to ask for second thoughts, to offer alternatives but not to stop government governing. Only the electorate can do that when they come in an election to judge the result, short of a major governing party split and collapse.

The tragedy of the USA in the last few weeks is the breakdown in trust or belief in the system by the main Opposition party. A large number of Trump voters think the results in a handful of key swing states were fiddled, but

their side has been unable to persuade the courts or the Senate of that allegation. As those institutions hold the reserve powers to order a re run or insist on a different electoral College result President Biden can fairly claim he won and passed all the checks and balances in the system. It leaves Trump voters arguing that the whole system is corrupt and out to get their man. This impression is not going to be stilled or calmed by the Democrat decision to impeach President Trump after he has left office. It will build the sense of grievance amongst many Trump supporters. If President Biden is to heal his country he cannot avoid tackling and talking about the issues around voting systems that perturb Trump supporters.

The Republican leaders have an important role to play. They need to show that they can now offer strong but sensible opposition to this new President. Going through his back history to try and find a way to impeach him as has become all too common in US politics would not be helpful. Setting out a positive alternative vision to the left's, and making it difficult in a 50/50 Senate to get through anything the Conservative half of the country disagrees with makes perfect sense. The Senate and House elections produced no landslide or big majority for a Democrat solution to US problems. Republican legislators need to show Trump voters they can use the power of opposition afforded to them to resist hated Democrat policies for their followers. For his part the President needs to show which parts of the Republican offer he thinks has some merit if he wants to build bridges. He needs to see just how divisive to Trump followers the Democrat position is on gun control, relaxation of abortion, bans on carbon fuels and completely open borders to name but four highly charged US issues .