

Clark's 'Why I am a Democrat'

Introduced by Richard Ely

This essay survives as a single handwritten manuscript in the Clark Papers.¹ Portions in the second half have often been scored out, usually to be replaced by new words. Some replacements have, in turn, been further replaced. One can infer the essay was revised at least twice. The main argument of the paper is discussed in papers by both Roe and Ely, and need not be summarised here.

'Why I am a Democrat' was printed in 1995 in *An Australian Democrat* with a short introduction by the present writer. Unwisely, I claimed that 'without doubt' the essay's context was 'circumstances preceding or following Clark's election to the House of Assembly in 1887.' Partly I had in mind its programmatic form, and that it pulsed 'with indignant energy' — just what one might expect from a candidate with an ambitious reform agenda. There was another reason for dating the essay as I did, although I did not spell this out. Towards the close, Clark quoted directly from Walt Whitman's 'Democratic Vistas' This, Clark said, had been written 'twenty years ago'. Whitman's essay was published 1867-68. Aha! I thought.

However Petrow, in research for his study of Clark as Attorney-General, which is published elsewhere in this book, made a discovery which makes the dating of 1887-8 highly suspect, at least for the essay as we have it. In a 15 August 1891 debate on a House of Assembly Resolution, that no elector could vote in more than one electorate, a resolution which Clark of course supported, he said:

He, along with many of his friends, were democrats, not because they cherished the dreams of their youth that any particular Government had power to create an ideal happiness, but he should say, for want of a better form of expressing it, they were democrats through despair. (Hear, hear)

In 'Why I am a Democrat' Clark remarked that 'I *once* described myself in my place in Parliament as a Democrat by despair'. [My emphasis] Inescapably, therefore, 'Democrat' — certainly part of it

1 University of Tasmania Archives, Clark Papers, C4/D38.

— was written post-1891. One can go further. The phrase in the essay — ‘I *once* described’ — tends to imply that a significant interval (well, quite a while) passed between 1891 and the time of writing it, or, to be ultra-cautious, the time of writing some of it. Roe’s suggestion that ‘Why I am a Democrat’ was written ‘around 1895’ is plausible, yet in my view perhaps too specific. I think it safer to locate the process of writing and retouching some or all of the essay in a band of years running from, and possibly a little beyond, the middle third of the 1890s.² Safer, I think, but not rock-safe.

That ‘Why I am a Democrat’ was composed in stages, even, possibly, over a considerable interval, is not impossible. The manuscript is in two parts, which differ markedly in two ways. The first three paragraphs, and several sentences in the fourth — which together I call the first part — are written in large, clear letters and show almost no scorings out. The remainder — the second part — shows a thinner, often scored through, evidently hurried, or at least fretted-over, script. There is a second difference. The first part tends to be physically neat though conceptually laboured; but the rest, while messy in appearance, is fluently concise in substance. Read in this way, the essay is evidence that the sense in which Clark was a democrat at the start of the essay differed, to an extent, from the sense in which democracy was part of his creed by the essay’s close. It is a beguiling thought, although the evidence adduced in this paragraph is suggestive rather than compelling, that ‘Why I am a Democrat’, in itself, *displays* the process by which Clark had become, by 1891, a ‘democrat by despair’.

2 Not relevant to dating ‘Why I am a Democrat’, but of interest as pointing to the resonance of Clark’s ‘despair’ speech, is reference to it in the House of Assembly six years later. B S Bird on 27 July 1897 had been criticising the credentials of a fellow member (not Clark) to rate as a democrat. Bird then playfully continued:

There were more democrats than one in the House. What was the Attorney-General? Had he not told them, in the most pathetic way, that he had become a democrat from despair. (Hear, hear) He did not know what better form of government that gentleman had in his mind’s eye, but it was evidently something he could not attain, and he was therefore driven to be a democrat.

Mr DUMARESQ: The best democrat in Tasmania.

Mr BIRD said he thought so too, and on that ground took up the cudgels for him in his absence. ...

(*Mercury*, 28 July 1897)

Why I am a Democrat

Andrew Inglis Clark

The full and exact meaning of a word which is commonly used to distinguish a particular opinion from another, which is generally supposed to be the antithesis of the opinion which is indicated by the word to be interpreted, can frequently be most readily arrived at by previously ascertaining the meaning of the word commonly used to describe the antithetical opinion; but I do not think that such a method of procedure can help me to explain what I intend to mean when I use the word democracy or democrat, because the word aristocracy, which is usually regarded as designatory of the antithesis of democracy, cannot be properly confined in its use to the description of a type of society as constant and precise in its essential characteristics as is that type of society which is properly described as democracy. A so called aristocracy may be a society in which all the governing power is deposited in the hands of the descendants of those who held it in the preceding generation, that is to say in the hands of an hereditary aristocracy; or it may be a society in which the governing power is exclusively in the hands of the wealthy members of it, that is to say, what the Greeks described as a Timocracy; or it may be a society in which the governing power is shared by hereditary rulers with other members of the community who are possessed of the requisite amount of property or who are elected by the other members; or the word may be used to designate a society in which, by some process of selection, those who are supposed to be the ablest and most virtuous members of the community are appointed to govern it. It is very evident that the position of the great body of the people will greatly differ in relation to their rulers in each of the four varieties of so-called aristocracy which I have attempted to describe, but while the particular governmental machinery may vary in separate democracies, the position of the people in relation to those entrusted with the governing power will be essentially the same in them all if they are such as can be truly described as democracies.

I shall therefore interpret the word democracy for the purposes of this discussion without reference to any particular form of political machinery, such as direct legislation by the whole body of the people, or by a limited number of elected representatives, or the relations of the legislative to the executive authority, and the definition which I have decided to place before you as the most correct and comprehensive of my own opinions as indicated by the word democrat, is the statement that I am a believer in the reality of the fundamental rights of man, and that I accept the affirmations of the declaration of independence by the people of the United States of America that for strictly political purposes all men must be regarded as equal in the possession of the inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

I know well that a large amount of the so-called scientific investigation of political problems during the last half century has produced a denial of the existence of any such things as natural rights of any kind whatever and that the

assertion of the equality of men has been met by an emphatic assertion of the inequality of men in their physical, intellectual and moral capacities as proved by every day experience in every age and in every country in the world, but I take the liberty of replying to all such arguments against the doctrines of the fundamental rights and natural equality of men, by saying that any attempt to distribute political power and counter personal privileges in proportion to the physical, intellectual and moral *inequalities* of men is an absolute impossibility, and that the only alternative to the acceptance of the doctrine of the natural equality of men as a basis for the organisation of society and the distribution of political power is a creation of artificial inequalities for that purpose. It is this alternative which has hitherto been actually adopted by the majority of human society and which has produced all the evils which the history of the world exhibits as dependent on political and social arrangements, evils which I admit to have been inevitable in the transition from savagery to civilisation, but which by their very existence have condemned the inequalities which have produced them and demonstrated the necessity for their removal before humanity could attain a higher development.

Society has no existence whatever apart from the mutual intercourse of the individuals who comprise it, and that intercourse is primarily physical, that is to say intercourse on the part of animals who are born, grow and are sustained by physical processes, and who are urged to their primary activities by their animal necessities and their animal capacities for pleasure and pain. In these I confidently assert that all men are broadly speaking equal and so far as social organisation exists for the protection of men's bodies from injury and the more perfect satisfaction of their animal necessities every member of the social organisation has an equal claim to the benefits it exists to bestow. The moral and intellectual capacities of men are developed by social organisation and the environment it creates, and if that environment were made the same for all men their moral and intellectual capacities would be as broadly equal as their animal capacities for pleasure and pain. It is therefore the differences in the social environment of men that creates in the long run, and from generation to generation, their moral and intellectual differences, and to deny the equal claims of all men to a recognition from society of the same right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, is to become involved in the self-contradictory proposition that some men shall be born into the world with *more than an equal claim* [than?] others to those privileges, before it is known whether their careers will be beneficial or injurious to the social organisation. It is this self-contradictory proposition which is actually put into practice when society is organised and political power and privileges distributed in accordance with those artificial inequalities which, as I have already observed, have never failed to beget evils which, while inevitable in the course of human progress, have demonstrated the inherent viciousness of the inequalities by which they have been produced.

I am therefore a democrat, firstly because the distribution of political power and privileges in accordance with the physical, moral and intellectual capacities of individuals is an impossibility, and because the political organisation of society upon a basis of the accidental and artificial inequalities of birth and

wealth inevitably produces evils that, in proportion to their extent, and their intensity proclaim the institution under which they arise as incapable of accomplishing the highest and ultimate purposes for which the social organism ought to exist. In view of this aspect of the question I once described myself in my place in Parliament as a Democrat by despair, because, while believing that all other systems were self-condemned by their distinctive fruits, I wished to guard myself from being understood as believing that the triumph of democracy would regenerate humanity and expel evil from the world. I indulge in no dream like that; but I desire the abolition of every institution that confers political power or personal privilege as an appendage to birth from a particular parentage, or to the possession of wealth, as so many obstacles to a more efficient marshalling and co-operation of the energies of humanity in its combat with the evils that arise inevitably from the imperfections and limitations of man's nature. To evoke the highest efforts on the part of every soldier in an army in the hour of battle it is necessary that they all should be animated by a mutual affection for one another and a mutual confidence in the faithfulness and the courage of each; and these can be secured only by such an equality of participation in the burdens and dangers of the battle as the topographical condition and tactical exigencies permit. But where individuals associate on terms of permanent inequality in the participation [in?] burdens and privileges there will be either distrust, suspicion, resentment and rancour or cringing deference and servility on the one side; and a corresponding distrust, suspicion and hatred or arrogance and contempt on the other. All such sentiments are directly and essentially antisocial in their nature and effects and tend therefore to the disorganisation and disruption of the social and political systems which produced them. The highest social ideal is the participation of each and all in the advantages and joys of true comradeship in all that makes our life, but this ideal can never be realised without an equality in mental culture and in capacity of aspiration and sympathy such as can be produced only after the removal of those extreme inequalities of material condition and political power and privilege which in the past have separated master from slave, lord from serf, and peer from peasant and made such comradeship impossible.

I am a democrat, secondly, because political power, as an eminent American jurist has expressed it,³ never goes begging. 'The desire for rule, the passion for power', he says, 'is, so far as the experience of mankind shows anything, as requisite for the continuation of government as other passions for the continuation of the race'. Whether this statement is strictly correct or not, we know that the passion for power is an universal element in human nature, and as in the past men have not hesitated, when the opportunity has offered itself, to wade through slaughter to a throne, so in the present and in the future political power will be desired and sought for by every means which the conscience of the aspirant for it will permit him to use. But there is nothing, which when possessed of it in any large extent, a man can use with more detriment to others,

3 I have not been able to locate this quotation.

and the temptation to so use will be constant, and in proportion to his moral and intellectual deficiencies will the temptation prevail.

The evil effects of the accumulation of all political power in the hands of one man is proved by the history of every country in the world where absolute monarchy has existed, and when the same amount of power is exercised by an oligarchy, possessors of it use it solely for their own advantage. And the same yielding to that temptation [is] equally visible as in a despotism. If the power is distributed among a sufficient number to necessitate the delegation of its exercise to some of its possessors selected by the others, it will continue as in the two previous cases to be exercised for the benefit of the ruling class and in disregard of the welfare of all others. This is the universal testimony of history, and in no country has the constancy of the temptation to use political power for the benefit of its possessors at the expense of others, and the certainty of the possessors of it yielding to this temptation, been more plainly exhibi[ted] in spite of religious and other influences to the contrary than in England. Even so lately as the seventh decade of the present century Professor Harold Rogers⁴ described the Parliament of England as ‘a crowd of eager ambitious men who do as much for their own interest as they dare and do as little for that of others as they can help’, and in connection with the same subject he declares that ‘If there be no natural right, slavery is the inevitable lot of the weak’.

In view of this constant use of political power by its possessors to fortify their own interests and to depress and [degrade?] all other interests over which they can exercise control, I claim for every individual in a community the right to share in the distribution of the power by the exercise of which the makers and executors of the laws are appointed, as the only guarantee there shall not be found within it an oppressed or insulted section. In practical politics under a representative system of government this claim takes the primary form of a demand for an equal vote in the selection of the law makers, and the maxim of one man one vote, when used without regard to sex is the logical formula of a genuinely democratic suffrage. But seeing that the very act of voting implies an actual or possible difference of opinion in regard to every matter upon which a vote is taken we find that we have to accept the decision of the majority as the actual process by which laws are to be made, and this fact brings us to the vital question of the respective rights of the majority and the minority in a democracy.

Power wielded by a majority may be used as oppressively as if [it] were exercised by a despot or an oligarchy, and the doctrine of the natural and fundamental rights of the individual is as condemnatory of the oppression in the one case as in the other. But the solution of the difficulty in a genuine democracy will be found in the combination of three factors. First, a system of electing representatives which will ensure the presence in the legislature of representatives of all opinions; second, the transitory composition of the temporary majority;

4 This was in fact James E Thorold Rogers. The quotation come from Rogers’ *Cobden and Modern Political Opinion: Essays on Certain Topics*, London, 1873, pp. 281 & 282. I thank Dr Petrow for suggesting that ‘Harold Rogers’ might be James E Thorold Rogers.

and third, fundamental laws for the protection of natural rights of the individual beyond the reach of the majority of the hour. Among those natural rights of the individual so protected will be the right to condemn and, within the limits of legal forms, to resist every law which works an injustice to him. A democracy so organised will reduce the actual power of the temporary majority to the minimum compatible with the stability of its own institutions and the preservation of order and so secure to every individual the freest possible career for the development of his or her capacities of living. To achieve this result is the highest mission for which society and government can exist and by this standard every form of social organisation and every political institution should be judged.

Lastly, I am a democrat because I believe in the power, and I may say in the necessity, of ideals to purify and elevate humanity either in the individual or in the collective life of social and political organisations. I can imagine an antagonist of the doctrine of the fundamental rights of man admitting that democracy, as I have attempted to sketch it, would be a preferable state of society to any other and would be worth striving to establish if it were practicable, but [if] on the contrary it must remain for ever in consequence of the inherent imperfections of humanity an unattained and unattainable ideal, and therefore the wisest thing to do in regard to the organisation of society is to accept the artificial and accidental inequalities which it exhibits as inevitable, and to endeavor to distribute the task of maintaining and regulating it in such a manner that those inequalities may be relied upon as so many securities for stability and order through the medium of the selfishness and personal ambition of each member of the community, I might reply primarily to such a statement by saying that the ideal which it depicts has never been and never will be reached in its entirety and its perfection, because the better and higher elements of human nature, as manifested in the heroes, saints and sages of the race, have always refused and ever will refuse to remain content with such environment and have always striven and ever will strive to change it, and therefore the order and security of society which the opponents of democracy deem all important, and for the certainty of which they would sacrifice all higher ideals, have not any sure permanent basis in the inequalities of the conditions or capacities of men.

But the more direct answer I desire to give to those who condemn the democratic ideal as an unattainable Utopia is the assertion that the law and condition of vigorous life and stability in the world of intellect and morals is a constant striving after the unattainable. As perpetual movement is the law and condition of life and growth in material organisms, so is there an obligation laid upon men in regard to their moral and intellectual natures to catch sight of higher levels of life, and to strive to reach them or to deteriorate and decay. This obligation follows men for ever into their social and political organisations, and only by the unceasing efforts of the prophets and heroic optimists age after age and decade after decade to levels above which yet higher levels were visible, has humanity been carried along its thorny and blood stained track from savagery to the civilization of today. It is the vision of an ideal higher than that which the facts around him embody, and the pursuit of it against all difficulty and

opposition, that marks the true hero and leader among men from the self-seeking counterfeit who uses the capacities and the blindness and weaknesses of other men as the instruments of his own aggrandisement and his pleasures. The first Napoleon distinctly avowed his contempt for every idealistic aspiration that had contributed to produce the Revolution on which he rode to power and openly appealed to the vanity and lower ambitions of Frenchmen, as he found them, for the maintenance of his system of government. 'We have finished the romance of the Revolution', said he, 'it is time to begin its history; to note only what is real and possible in the application of its principles, and to ignore all that is merely speculative and hypothetical'; and the climax of his attempt to shut out every glimpse of a higher and nobler life for future generations than that which his system permitted was reached in the publication of the official catechism for the use of all the schools in France, in which the children were taught that 'to honour and serve the Emperor was to honour and serve God himself, and that those who should fail in their duties towards him' would be resisting the order of God Himself, and would render themselves worthy of eternal damnation.

From such a degrading and depressing spectacle let us to the image and word of Washington on taking the chair as president of the Convention in Philadelphia that framed the Federal Constitution of the United States: 'If to please the people, we offer what we ourselves disapprove, how can we afterward defend our work. Let us raise a standard to which the wise and honest can repair'. In those immortal words of Washington I have always believed that there is to be found the all sufficient and effectual reply to the arguments that are constantly used in support of the monarchical and aristocratical forms of the British Constitution, when comparing its practical operation with that of republican institutions. Some of our friends are always telling us that Englishmen live under a government that is truly as republican in its character as that which exists in the United States of America, and they delight in pointing to the corruption and demagoguery that has disfigured so much of American politics as proofs that republican institutions are not guarantees for honest and truly democratic government. But who will undertake to say that the corruption would have been so fully exposed, and that the demagoguery would have assumed a form in which its real nature was so plainly manifest and therefore shorn of half its power to do mischief, under monarchical and aristocratic forms. The fiercest critics of American politics are American patriots whose loyalty to the constitution under which they live and whose faith in the merit of republican institutions is measured by the very severity with which they condemn and denounce the evils that hinder the realisation of the republican ideal, and their condemnation of those evils finds half its inspiration and an authoritative sanction in the *prior* condemnation that the language and doctrines of the Declaration of Independence and the Federal Constitution pronounce. In those two documents they have, in the words of Washington, a standard to which the wise and honest may repair as a sure and steadfast rallying point for every conflict.

Among such critics Walt Whitman stands pre-eminent, and we almost shudder when we read the picture he drew twenty years ago of the morals of his country men. 'The depravity', said he, 'of the business classes of our country is

not less than has been supposed, but uniformly greater. The whole of the official services of America, national, state and municipal, in all their branches and departments, except the judiciary, are saturated in corruption, bribery, falsehood and maladministration; and the judiciary is tainted. The great cities reek with respectable as much as non respectable robbery and scoundrelism'.⁵ Yet the same critic tells us that 'the movements of the late secession war, and their results, to any sense that studies well and comprehends them, show that popular democracy, whatever its faults and dangers, practically justifies itself beyond the proudest claims and wildest hopes of its enthusiasts'.⁶ The reconciliation of these two estimates is to be found in the existing wide field of possibilities for heroic service and high character, and the many perpetual provocations to educe them, which American democracy affords, and in the magnificent responses to those provocations by succeeding generations of citizens, whose heroic images stretch in an unbroken line down the vista of American history urging and [inspiring?] all succeeding generations to live lives worthy of such great traditions. It is [thus?] with the vision of this long line of heroes before our eyes that we may well take upon our lips the words of Longfellow and, regarding America as the symbol and representative of Democracy for all the world, ... say,

Sail on, O Union strong and great!⁷

5 'Democratic Vistas' originally published 1867-8, *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, New York, 1982, p. 937. Clark's version is here corrected from Whitman's original.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 944.

7 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 'The Building of the Ship'. Clark's version corrected from Longfellow's original.