

Threads in the Tartan

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It's been a strange few months for democracy: the United States elects a president who would have been literally unimaginable a generation ago, yet Europe – and England in particular – elects so-called representatives of whom the vast majority are deeply ashamed.

Why does democracy matter? It's not just a method for forming governments. In that regard, Plato was probably right to regard democracy as a Very Bad Thing, as it has the potential to set us on the slippery slope through demagogy to tyranny. In this week of what we realise with a shiver would have been Anne Frank's 80th birthday, few of this generation need to be persuaded of that.

Democracy matters because it presupposes certain attitudes to others. It entails the right to dissent, since it would serve no purpose if we were all, at all times and on all matters, in perfect agreement. What holds a society together is not how much we agree with one another but how we handle disagreement – which is why political movements that do not tolerate dissent are pathological. Democracy, accepting diversity on the one hand and the authority of the majority on the other, is what holds society together.

Argument is a feature of Jewish tradition. The Talmud itself is a record of hundreds of years of argument, and it teaches that argument for the sake of heaven endures, while argument for the sake of personal glory perishes. The analogy is clear: the point is not for one to overwhelm the others, but for all to coexist for the sake of a coherent whole. That is where strength lies – not in uniformity, but in pattern, which is to say the coexistence of difference.

Just think of a fabric made entirely of parallel threads – it would be no fabric at all, as there would be nothing to hold it together. And to continue the metaphor, what makes a tartan is the intersection of a variety of colours and shades that nonetheless retain their identity within the whole, all holding together, not despite their intersections, but because of those intersections.

We in Scotland should be proud of the commitment of our politicians to “*One Scotland – Many Cultures*”, not merely as a slogan but as a driver of policy. This Scotland of many cultures is a society in which each community makes a valuable contribution to the whole, while still retaining its own unique identity. It is our diverse identities that are the weave that holds the fabric of Scotland together, and I am proud to be one thread in that tartan.