

Mony a Mickle Maks a Consensus

Thought for the Day

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I guess there's a general perception that religion and democracy don't mix. We tend to think of theocratic states as dictatorships – and after all, if religion lays down how to live your life, then what room is there for a public opinion poll?

In fact, though, the Bible comes down clearly on the side of the people – though perhaps “clearly” isn't the right word! “Follow the majority,” it says in a fairly obscure passage of Exodus, “but not to do evil.” So even if you could please all of the people all of the time, that might not be the right thing to do.

I was thinking about this last week when I was at one of those courses on how to suck eggs that seem inescapable in public bodies. At one point we were asked what the most important function of a committee chair is. My answer was achieving consensus. Consensus isn't majority rule – it's compromise. Everyone goes away a bit dissatisfied – but isn't that better than some being completely alienated? Everyone has a share in the outcome, and no-one's likely to start a revolution!

That's why I'm always puzzled when people claim that coalitions are undemocratic and frustrate the will of the people. And I wonder whether it's that same all-or-nothing mind-set that has stymied the negotiations to form a new government in Greece.

Greece may be the home of democracy, but, ironically, in this regard Scotland can teach them a lesson. Consider the patchwork of rather strange bedfellows that now make up local government here. This doesn't mean that politicians have abandoned their ideals; they've just settled for a glass half full – and as a result, the majority of voters will get the majority of what they wanted.

So if the log-jammed Greek politicians are listening to Radio Scotland this morning, I have a message for them: mony a mickle maks a muckle! Many minorities make a majority, or to paraphrase Exodus: “follow the majority, but don't go to extremes”!