A DAY IN THE LIFE OF DEMOCRACY

What makes a democracy? And what does democracy mean to you?

Even though we spend every day of our lives living in a country globally acknowledged as a democracy, it can be surprisingly hard to define exactly what that means. Is it about freedom and human rights, or is it our system of government and elections that makes us a democracy?

Perhaps the confusion comes from the fact that democracy can mean different things in different places. According to the United Nations, while democracies share common features, there is no single model of democracy, and democracy is not owned or decided by any particular country or region.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said the widespread popular uprisings in the Middle East and parts of North Africa over the last year reaffirmed that democracy is defined by those who seek it.

"This year also served as a reminder that democracy cannot be exported or imposed from abroad; it must be generated by the will of the people and nurtured by a strong and active civil society," Mr Ban said.

"The world saw the truth of the saying that countries do not become fit for democracy; they become fit through democracy."

First steps

Democracy has also shown many different faces since the term was first coined in Ancient Greece more than 2,500 years ago.

At around 500BC the city state of Athens developed a society where all citizens, regardless of wealth, were able to hold public office, contribute to the decisions of government, and receive equal rights in all things.

Public officials were chosen by lot with no-one being able to serve in a position more than once. Each of the policies to be carried out by these officials were decided by a majority vote of the Ecclesia, a grand assembly open to all male citizens of Athens.

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle described Athenian democracy as being underpinned by a constitution based on liberty, equality and the will of the majority – sentiments echoed in the constitutions of many democratic countries to this day.

Despite the modern influence of Athenian democracy, the system only lasted in Athens for two centuries and was critically viewed by some contemporary academics as the rule of the poor over the educated, or "mob rule".

Other systems with some democratic elements followed, such as the Republic in Rome from around the fourth century BC and various Nordic and Indian assemblies.

But our modern system of parliamentary democracy, where the parliament has the ultimate power to govern the country, did not appear until after the English Civil War in 1649 when King Charles I was executed and the absolute power of the monarchy abolished.

The Australian story

While Australia was only federated as one nation in 1901, our country and the British colonies that preceded it have contributed some crucial elements to modern democracy.

Being able to cast a vote without anyone else knowing how you voted

DEMOCRACY'S DAWN: *Ancient Greece led the way*

THINKSTOCK

may be commonplace now, but it was a revolutionary idea when the colonies of Tasmania, Victoria and South Australia introduced secret ballots for voting in elections during the 1850s.

South Australia also led the way in ensuring that each person was only given one vote in each election, and the Australian colonies and the federated nation were some of the first parliaments in the world to extend voting rights to women.

Today Australia is a full parliamentary democracy, with all members of both the upper and lower houses of federal parliament elected in open and transparent elections and responsible for representing the will of the people in the laws they create.
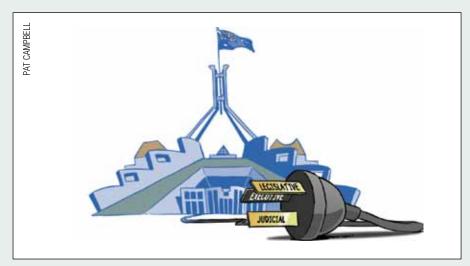
All citizens over the age of 18 have equal voting rights, and our legal system is founded on principles of justice and equality for all before the law, regardless of personal characteristics or beliefs such as gender, race, sexuality or religious views.

Democracy in many forms

While Australia could be seen as a model democracy, the Australian way is far from the only way to do things.

In the United States for example, the head of state is a President directly elected by the people and with the power to propose or reject laws, unlike the more ceremonial role of the Queen and her representative in Australia, the Governor-General.

In the United Kingdom many members of the House of Lords have been directly appointed to their positions rather than elected, and in India elections are only held once every five years and there are 790 members of parliament, almost four times as many as there are in Australia.

THE AUSTRALIAN WAY: *Separation of powers*

A day of its own

One of the key roles of the United Nations is to promote the spread of democracy as the natural environment for the protection and effective realisation of human rights.

In 2007 the UN launched the International Day of Democracy, to be held each year on 15 September. On that day we are all invited to celebrate the freely expressed will of people to determine their own political, economic, social and cultural systems and their full participation in all aspects of their lives.

Speaking on last year's International Day of Democracy, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said the real meaning of democracy is providing a better world for those who will follow us.

"On this International Day of Democracy, let us redouble our efforts to support all people, in particular the young – the drivers of this year's momentous events – in making democracy a working reality," Mr Ban said. "This day belongs to them. Let us honour their commitment to a lifelong journey in democracy."

YOUR TIME STARTS…NOW!

To celebrate International Day of Democracy on 15 September, we are asking you to take 60 seconds to think about democracy.

Divide into small groups and for 60 seconds each tell your group what democracy means to you.

Write down all your responses and circle the three things you agree are the most important.

Choose someone from your group to present your answers to your class with a 60 second time limit.