

# TheACTUARY

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# Plato and leotards

I AM BEGINNING TO LOSE FAITH IN THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS.

Despite dressing up in a red leotard and performing a robotic dance, and despite licking invisible milk from Rula Lenska's hands while pretending to be a cat, the member of Parliament for Bethnal Green and Bow was voted out of *Celebrity Big Brother* at an early stage. What more could he possibly have done to win?

George Galloway should have triumphed in *Big Brother*, and his premature eviction underlines one of the flaws of unfettered democracy: that if the public are fools they will make foolish decisions. An alternative is selective democracy, in which you have to prove that you are able to cast a reasoned vote. In the general election you would vote only if you could correctly answer basic political questions. 'What would be the likely effect of increasing the money supply? A: inflation. B: deflation. C: damnation.' 'Tsar Nicholas II was "a little man lost in the immensity of his realm." Discuss.'

The Institute of Actuaries uses selective democracy already in the way it elects its next president. You have to be able to demonstrate, before you are allowed to vote, that you are on the Council. This is fair enough, given that the members of the Council are democratically elected by the membership (other than when there are too few candidates for the seats available). The Faculty elects its president by a ballot of the fellowship at the AGM. Both methods are admirably democratic, although I did receive a letter from a reader who objected to the use of the expression 'president-elect' (ie 'elected but not in place yet') in the press release announcing Nick Dumbreck's imminent presidency. He wrote 'My initial thought on reading this was "I didn't vote for him"'. I was reminded of that scene in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*...':

*King Arthur: 'I am your king!'*

*Old Woman: 'Well, I didn't vote for you.'*

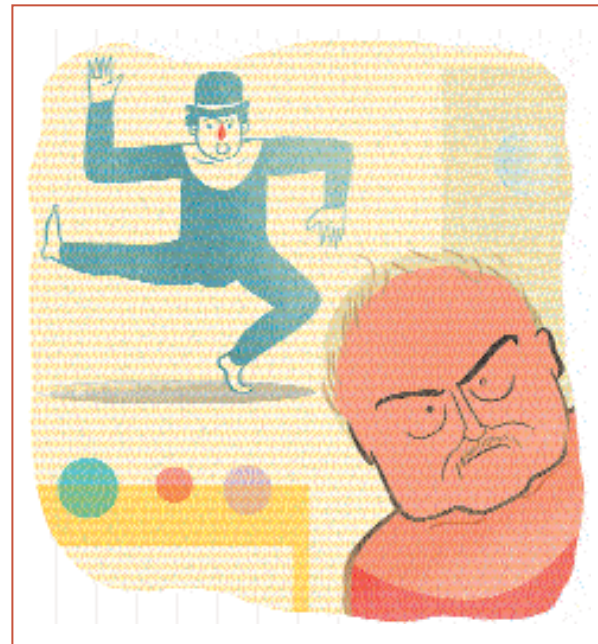
*King Arthur: 'You don't vote for kings.'*

*Old Woman: 'Well, how did you become king then?'*

*King Arthur: 'The Lady of the Lake, ... her arm clad in the purest shimmering samite, held aloft Excalibur from the bosom of the water signifying by Divine Providence that I, Arthur, was to carry Excalibur... That is why I am your king!'*

*Dennis: 'Listen. Strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government. Supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the masses, not from some farcical aquatic ceremony.'*

Another potential disadvantage of democratic government is that laws are 'written by committee'. The argument goes that the output of a committee is a weighted average of the opinions of its individual members, which may result in the outcome being an uncomfortable hotchpotch of conflicting viewpoints. If the laws were written by one person, they would not be subject to such restrictions. But this seems to be a necessary evil, as the alternative to determining laws through a process of compromise is having one person



– a dictator – write them. And the perils of dictatorship are worse. Look at Saparmurat Niyazov, the president for life of Turkmenistan. He has decreed that all clocks bear his image, has renamed one of the months of the year after his mother, and once ordered that a giant ice palace be constructed in the middle of the desert. No committee would sign that one off.

An interesting system of government is set out in Plato's *The Republic*, in which democratically elected philosopher-kings run the society. Becoming a philosopher-king sounds fun. It requires general education until age 18, two years of physical training, ten years of mathematics, five years studying dialectic, and 15 years of apprenticeship. Then, at age 50, you are a philosopher-king. Makes the actuarial qualification look like a piece of cake.

Returning, then, to George Galloway. Galloway may in time regret his appearance on *Celebrity Big Brother*, but he did go in with good intentions. His aim was to 'reach across to the politically dispossessed'. Unfortunately, Channel 4 dubbed over all his political comments with birdsong, as none of the other celebrities was deemed capable of providing 'countervailing balance' to his political views. But could *Big Brother* be a means of reaching across to the actuarially dispossessed? Ought the Faculty and Institute to decide, after three sessional meetings, two working parties, and a guidance note, to put an actuary on the show? They would have to send in someone charismatic, like Andrew Smith, or someone who looks good in a leotard, like ██████████ ██████████. When I suggested this to a colleague of mine, he had a suggestion of his own. 'Forget the *Big Brother* house,' he said. 'Put an actuary on the moon! And leave him there.'

 TIMOTHY BRAMHAM