

The State of Democracy

“...I remember many years ago being asked by my daughter for advice on finding good 'husband material'.
By all means, marry whomever you fall in love with, I told her, but never fall in love with a politician!”

One of the oldest stories in every book of anecdotes is that of George Bernard Shaw teasing the actress Mrs Patrick Campbell into admitting that she would sleep with him for a million pounds. He then asked if she would do so for five pounds. 'What do you think I am?' she demanded in feigned outrage. 'We have already established that, madam,' answered Shaw. 'Now we are merely haggling over the price.'

I am an avowed fan of the BBC's World News channel – as an ex Beeb man myself, that is hardly surprising. But to have watched that channel over the past few weeks, one could have been forgiven for believing that apart from the British election, nothing else was happening in the rest of the world. Little coverage of the giant oil spill in America from the exploding BP platform; little too on the killing rampage that occurred in some of China's schools; and almost nothing of another election on the other side of the world being held in the Philippines.

In the UK, Nick Clegg leader of the Liberal Democrats – climbed into bed with the Conservative Party, whom most of his supporters hate. A few Tories, in their turn, are dismayed that David Cameron has made a deal with a party of hookers. But the consequence is that Britain has a new government.

The good news is that Britain is finally rid of mealy-mouthed Gordon Brown and his left-wing cronies. The British people have very short memories, but it was Brown who was responsible for ensuring that many – very many – Brits will spend their last days in poverty thanks to a tax on pensions that he almost single-handedly brought in when he was the Chancellor of the Exchequer under Tony Blair (who, himself, has recently hit the headlines for earning nearly £400,000 some HK\$4m - for two 30-minute speeches).

Britain has always prided itself – in the way that the UK likes to be smug about such things that it is the oldest parliamentary democracy in the world. It is often first in the queue to point out the inadequacies and failings of foreign political structures and their voting systems.

So it was ironic indeed that, still relying on antiquated paper ballot sheets and sometimes outdated lists of voters, thousands were turned away when the voting stations closed at 10pm, denied the chance to vote. Yet, in true British fashion, there were no riots or large-scale demonstrations, even though many younger and less solid democracies around the world have done better jobs of ensuring all those eligible could cast their votes in elections.

Meanwhile on the other side of the world, Senator Benigno Aquino III is to become the next President of the Philippines following an election in which a computerised vote-counting system was used for the first time, whose effectiveness surprised many. It replaced a pen-and-paper system that often took weeks to produce results, and allowed plenty of time and opportunity for cheating. Many had argued that the computerised system would not work. Some opposition figures even said it was designed to fail, to allow the outgoing president, Gloria Arroyo, to cling to power.

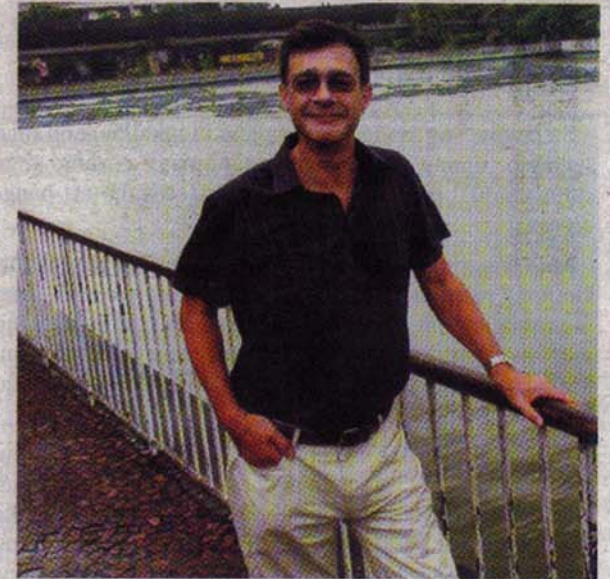
But on polling day, voters showed up in droves, with turnout reaching 75 percent in some areas, according to Comelec. Some machines malfunctioned – Mr. Aquino himself had to wait several hours to vote – but only about 400 of the more than 76,000 deployed, Comelec said. The key moment came when the polls closed and the machines began wirelessly transmitting the results to central servers. Some machines had trouble establishing communications, but within hours, Comelec began posting results on its website.

Of course, the machines did not prevent other ills of Philippine elections, such as vote-buying and intimidation, but they were an important introduction to a democratic process that has made very many Filipinos wary of ever trusting a politician.

I remember many years ago being asked by my daughter for advice on finding good 'husband material'. By all means, marry whomever you fall in love with, I told her, but never fall in love with a politician!

By: Brian Salter

Brian is currently affiliated with Action Global Communications in UAE as Broadcaster & Journalist, Travel & Tours News Correspondent and English News Anchor



Brian walking the pathway along Lapu-lapu Shrine in Manila.

The past month reminds me of yet another famous anecdote:

While walking down the street one day a Member of Parliament is tragically hit by a bus and dies. His soul arrives in heaven and is met by St. Peter at the pearly gates. 'Welcome to heaven,' says St. Peter. 'Before you settle in, because of who you were down on earth, we can give you a choice as to where you want to spend eternity.'

'No problem, just let me in,' says the MP. 'Well, I'd like to, but I have orders from higher up. What we'll do is have you spend one day in hell and one in heaven. Then you can choose.'

And with that, St. Peter escorts him to the elevator and he goes down, down, down to hell. The doors open and he finds himself in the middle of a green golf course. In the distance is a clubhouse and standing in front of it are all his friends and other politicians who had worked with him.

Everyone is very happy and in evening dress. They run to greet him, shake his hand, and reminisce about the good times they had while getting rich at the expense of the people. They play a friendly game of golf and then dine on lobster, caviar and champagne. Also present is the devil, who really is a very friendly guy, dancing and telling jokes. They are having such a good time that before he realises it, it is time to go.

Everyone gives him a hearty farewell and waves while the elevator rises... It goes up, up, up and the door reopens at the Pearly Gates where St. Peter is waiting for him.

Another 24 hours pass with the MP joining a group of contented souls moving from cloud to cloud, playing the harp and singing. They have a good time and, before he realises it, the 24 hours have gone by and St. Peter returns.

'Well, then, you've spent a day in hell and another in heaven. Now choose your eternity.' The MP reflects for a minute, then he answers 'Well, I would never have said it before, I mean heaven has been delightful, but I think I would be better off in hell.'

So St. Peter escorts him to the elevator and he goes down, down, down to hell.

When the doors of the elevator open, he's in the middle of a barren land covered with waste and garbage. He sees all his friends, dressed in rags, picking up the trash and putting it in black bags as more rubbish falls from above. The devil comes over to him and puts his arm around his shoulder.

'I don't understand,' stammers the MP. 'Yesterday I was here and there was a golf course and clubhouse, and we ate lobster and caviar, drank champagne, and danced and had a great time. Now there's just a wasteland full of garbage and my friends look miserable. What happened?'

The devil looks at him, smiles and says, 'Yesterday we were campaigning... Today you voted!'