

Freedom as Non-domination

*Philip Pettit, Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government,
Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997*

Reviewed by David W. Lovell

AUSTRALIA is currently involved in a debate over 'the republic', a debate which turns on the nationality, title and powers of the head of state, and which has ebbed and flowed with the political fortunes of its proponents. The notion of an Australian republic is fundamentally connected with political symbolism, though its detractors fear it may ultimately shift real power in the political system from prime minister to president.

Philip Pettit, a philosopher at The Australian National University, has written a thoughtful and impressive book on republicanism which is quite properly removed from this scrap, chiefly because its focus is on the substance of political systems. As political thinkers have long understood, particular systems can display various forms and symbols; thus did Montesquieu in the 18th century discern a republic under the form of the English constitutional monarchy.

Pettit's book will not do much to illuminate the current Australian debate; it is far more important than that. It seeks to give good reasons for preferring a republican form of government to all others: not the republic as counterpoint to monarchy, but the republic as the embodiment of freedom. Pettit is aware that the project is not a modest one. His book is the culmination of many years of intellectual endeavour, in which the author has investigated the methodological bases and some of the policy settings of a philosophy of freedom. It proposes to point what is a fairly sterile political debate over freedom in a new direction by drawing on the republican tradition of thought associated especially with Cicero, Machiavelli and Harrington.

The book is organised into two major parts: the first makes the theoretical case for a republican version of freedom, and includes a historical account of the origins and vicissitudes of this conception, while the second examines some practical issues for republican government. Useful summaries of each chapter (in a series of propositions) are collected near the end of the book.

The core theoretical issue concerns the republican account of freedom. The modern debate over freedom, which owes something to Benjamin Constant but even more to Isaiah Berlin's contrast between negative and positive liberty, has been stuck in a rut. Against both sides of this debate — the one which sees freedom as non-interference, the other which sees it as self-mastery — Pettit posits the republican notion of freedom as non-domination. One is free, for Pettit, in the sense that one is protected against arbitrary interference, and in the sense that one can enjoy a sense of security and standing among others. The implications of this version of freedom are substantial. It suggests that a free person is subordinate to no one. It is consonant with equality and community, and also with democracy. It does not

oppose self-mastery or autonomy, but sees it as unnecessary for a social project of freedom. It is not limited to the sphere we generally call 'politics', for it is appropriate to all human relations, including those between husband and wife, employer and employee, welfare recipient and bureaucrat. In that other, inconclusive, modern debate between individualists and communitarians, Pettit believes that the republican conception of freedom can steer between the extremes of collectivism and atomism.

Pettit champions the republican conception of freedom in response to what he sees as the shortcomings of liberal conceptions, which, he claims, are relatively indifferent to inequalities of power in 'non-political' areas such as the home and the workplace. He also champions it in the face of its traditional proponents, who thought it appropriate only for an elite of propertied, mainstream males. He thinks that it can be made universal, and that it will be attractive, since it provides a solution to many of our political and social problems.

Pettit distinguishes the republican conception of freedom from the liberal conception by insisting that liberty may be lost without interference, and interference may occur without any loss of liberty. Republicanism differs from liberalism particularly in its view of law: while law constitutes an interference, a properly constituted law does not lead to a loss of freedom. Freedom on this view is not the silence of the law, but is created by law. In the rise of the former view of law from Hobbes onwards, Pettit argues, lay the decline of the republican view of freedom; the latter was finally eclipsed in the debates over the American Revolution.

If to be free is not to be dominated, a great deal turns on the meaning of 'domination'. Domination means living at the mercy of another person, even if that person never moves against you; it gives rise to fear and deference. Domination, Pettit continues, means one agent exercising arbitrary sway over another. It is arbitrary because it does not track the interests and ideas of the other (or, elsewhere, the 'welfare and world view' of the public); those interests may be tested, he suggests, by public discussion. Identifying arbitrariness is a political matter, and cannot be deduced *a priori*. But this clarification does not seem enough to kill objections that the result would encourage those who believed they had a mandate or a mission to force others to be free.

What, then, of the institutional consequences of this republicanism? The main strategies against domination consist of reciprocal power and constitutional provision. Pettit stresses that controlling republican government is not a heroic task, especially when done by the humble committee. He adds that republicanism is not just about the shape of institutions; for institutions to work, and for laws to be effective, they need to be embedded in a network of norms in civil society. There is, he argues, a higher degree of non-domination (freedom) where norms support republican laws.

The republican conception of freedom, and Pettit's presentation of it, are in many ways attractive. They seem to unite and reconcile the modern tricolour: liberty, equality, fraternity. Pettit sees republican freedom as a primary good, something that people have instrumental reasons to want no matter what else they want.

How, he asks, could people fail to want it? Yet how is it to be achieved? Pettit sees the state as having a larger role than that envisaged by the liberals: as well as establishing equality before the law, the state must seek to reduce material inequalities.

Here we come to the practical nub of republicanism, which will irritate liberals by the larger role it allows to the state for action and intervention in areas of social life. Yet the state's power may be a threat, and Pettit attempts to counter it with constitutionalism (the dispersion of powers and the 'empire of laws') and democracy (where the objective is not so much consent as the genuine ability to contest public decisions).

Pettit's account sometimes seems too good to be true. Just as Marx once declared that 'democracy was the solved riddle of all constitutions', so Pettit might well say the same of his republicanism. He tries to show that it resolves major problems, and that 'environmentalism, feminism, socialism and multiculturalism can be cast as republican causes' (p.134), not to mention the demands of more mainstream groups. Surely opposition to it is a result of ignorance or ill will? Like many thinkers before him, Pettit promotes reason against the demands of sectional interests. Furthermore, he believes that people need not be angels to sustain the behaviours required for republicanism. Politicians, he adds, are inherently corruptible, but he believes that sanctions and screens will provide a sufficient guard.

I regretted the absence of some discussion of nationalism and, relatedly, of some basis for deciding why people should be a member of this state rather than that. Historically, universalist ideas have quickly fallen prey to rather more mundane, particularist associations. And since 'domination' is one of the key concepts presented here, I wondered how it would cope if people were systematically mistaken about their interests (as some accounts of 'ideology' maintain), and even whether the norms of civil society which support republican laws may themselves be or become oppressive.

What are the chances of success of this republicanism? Even less than the Australian republic's. Pettit sees politics as a conversation. He assumes that he will be able to convince people: the few who will read and understand his book, and later, perhaps, others. He discounts the role of unreason, irrationality, and interest. But if politics begins with philosophy, it ends with manifestos. It may listen to reason, but numbers are trumps. There is no doubt that this work deserves serious and careful assessment; whether it will get it is quite another matter.

David Lovell is Senior Lecturer in Politics at University College, The University of New South Wales (Australian Defence Force Academy).