

In what way should Buddhadhamma affect our politics?

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 3 min read

The recent vote concerning membership of the EU, (and perhaps we can include the presidential elections in USA) brought up one stark reality about democracy. The vast majority of us (I include myself) don't know enough to make a truly informed vote. And the 'information' given by parties, newspapers and other social outlets are always skewed towards their own bias. Indeed all of us vote from a biased angle – our preference. Politics is about power. So when we vote, we put someone in power over us! When a person or party has power, they can change our society, our national and local community. When an election comes round, this is the only time, we, ordinary citizens have a chance to affect the political landscape and so the society, the national and local communities we live in. The Buddha got involved in the politics of his time, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly. Though a very different society, the moral problems around power were the same. When a dispute arose over the water rights of the Rohini River between the Buddha's own clan, the Sakya and the neighbouring clan, the Koliya, he went to pacify a situation that threatened to turn into a war. He asked them what is more precious the water that runs in the river or the blood that runs in our veins? The new young king of Magadha, Ajātasattu (who starved his father to death!), sent advisors to ask the Buddha whether it was a good time to attack the Vajji Sangha, a democratic republic. The Buddha enumerates the qualities that make a sustainable Sangha, the monastic order. (see below). The king took this to mean it was 'not the right time' to attack. So he then went on by subterfuge to undermine those very qualities the Buddha had obliquely praised and so eventually conquered them. Whether the Buddha would have voted or not, is a moot point. There are party politics and there are also some real people issues out there. These days there are so many community issues on the plate – immigration, NHS, armed intervention, the financial sector, EU, climate change and so on. Is there a way we can guide ourselves so that we are not boxed in by our own views and opinions and worse by our unacknowledged biases; nor swayed by popular demand? A very old friend who is active in local politics texts: Cultural sensitivity is empathy. However, political correctness has now come to create a consensus on truth and bans criticism - and denigrates those who object to that consensus. It is instructive to make a list and write what we want to happen and why. And then to question our assumptions by seeing what those opposed to our positions are arguing. To be open to their arguments. To listen - and not be afraid that we will somehow be hoodwinked or brainwashed or converted. It may surprise us that opposing arguments also have their strengths. We may move to a more nuanced position. Post Script: Talk on TED: http://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan_haidt_on_the_moral_mind?language=en Transcript Jonathan Haidt: The moral roots of liberals and conservatives Is this why liberals (small l) become conservative (small c) in later life? A Moral Politics Given that government, in theory at least, is our common will,

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representing us as a people, how do we define ourselves? Will we come to the aid of those among us struggling to get by or will we throw the needy back upon their own meager resources? Is the prevailing philosophy of governance one of mutual concern and collective help, or one of stark individualism in which everyone has to fend for themselves, or at best rely on charity? This is not so much a political question as a moral one, a question pertaining to the moral basis of our common life. Much depends on how we answer it.- Bhikkhu Bodhi, "A Moral Politics"

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