Political representation and responsible government

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What is political representation? The question must seem either mundane or precocious. Surely, we either already know perfectly well what political representation is; and if we do not, then a short essay is unlikely to enlighten us. This would indeed be the case were we asking about how political representation operates in contemporary democracies, or about how it is understood by political scientists and elected representatives. The purpose of this essay, however, is not to survey such topics. Rather, the purpose is something bolder: to make a claim about what political representation truly is, whether it is so understood by those involved. This will be a theological account, an attempt to explain what the Christian faith ought to mean for our understanding of political representation. Although it is somewhat unfamiliar, it is a way of thinking that can illuminate aspects of the contemporary political situation that are often felt to be perplexing. In particular, it has the potential to restore our thinking about an idea that has become problematic in Australia today—the notion of responsible government. We begin, though, from the idea of political representation.¹

Political representation

Jesus, the Messiah, represents his people. That is to say, he acts on behalf of his people. “We are convinced,” wrote the apostle Paul, “that one has died for
all; therefore all have died!” (2 Cor 5:14). Here is the logic of representation: one has acted for others, so that his action applies to them.3

For Jesus to represent his people in this way, he had to be like them. “It is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants. For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way” (Heb 2:16–17). And yet, Jesus also had to be unlike us: “just as we are—yet he did not sin” (Heb 4:15). Otherwise, he could not have done on our behalf what we needed to be done. As British theologian Oliver O’Donovan puts it, “the representative had to contribute something that was not already there. He could not represent by being the supremely average figure . . . To represent is to transcend the represented; it cannot be done from a position of complicity. In the identification of the representative with the represented there is something fitting, but there is also something innovative and unforeseen.”4 Christ represents us, not by doing merely what we can do or what we want him to do, but by doing what we need him to do but cannot do ourselves.

His representative status is not established by us. We do not elect him Messiah. Rather, he is appointed by God as both our true and rightful king and high priest. We are called only to recognise him as such, to acclaim him as our champion. “I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain”, says God in Psalm 2:6, and the first Christians saw that this referred to Jesus (Acts 4:25–27). “He was designated by God to be high priest” (Heb 5:10). Jesus is our representative; but we did not choose him. He is given to us, and we are invited to find ourselves represented by him.

How does all this bear on the question of political representation? Let us first note an obvious but easily overlooked point: Christ’s representation is not remote from “politics”. Indeed, it is political in the truest sense. He is the Messiah, the Lord, to whom all authority has been given. It is not as if Jesus’ representative status somehow does not apply to his being king. It is the representative who is the king. His political authority is representative authority. What we have in Jesus is the paradigmatic instance of political representation.

Surely, though, political representation today is a wholly different thing! There are indeed profound differences between Christ’s representation and that of, say, members of the Australian Parliament. We should hesitate, however, before concluding that they are entirely different. The reason for this is that there is a common core to the notion of representation that has to do with having authority to act on behalf of others.
This point was once less difficult to grasp. Prompted by the English civil war to reflect on the nature of political authority, Thomas Hobbes saw representation as the key. Either a monarch or an assembly, he thought, is “given . . . the right to present the person of them all, that is to say, to be their representative.” A king, Hobbes held, is as much a representative as an elected assembly, because representation is fundamentally about authority to act in another’s name. The function of the idea of a social contract was not, for Hobbes, to justify elections as the way to establish representatives—his argument was for monarchy—but rather to explain the character of political authority, why political authority was representative, somehow unifying a multitude of people into one so that they could act in common. The king is representative, said Hobbes, because he “beareth the person of the people.”

Nor did this understanding of representation swiftly perish as an anomaly. “The King is representative of the people”, declared Edmund Burke in 1770, “so are the Lords; so are the judges. They all are trustees of the people, as well as the Commons.” Burke could say this, because he understood representation as first and foremost about a trust, a responsibility laid upon someone. Speaking after his election by the freemen of Bristol, Burke described the task of a representative in this way:

It ought to be the happiness and glory of a Representative, to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents . . . It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasures, his satisfactions, to theirs; and above all, ever, and in all cases, to prefer their interest to his own. But, his unbiased opinion, his mature judgement, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you; to any man, or to any sett of men living. These he does not derive from your pleasure; no, nor from the Law and the Constitution. They are a trust from Providence, for the abuse of which he is deeply answerable. Your Representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.

Doubtless, such talk feels a little odd today, so accustomed are we to thinking about representation as first and foremost about election by universal suffrage. (Though, of course, suffrage is never truly universal—children, at
least, do not vote; and yet they are still represented.) Moreover, there is truth
in the idea that a representative must be responsive to those she represents,
as well as the instinct that there is something wrong when whole groups
of people are invisible in government. Christ, to represent his people, had
to be like them, we recall. Yet the core of representation still lies in having
authority to act on behalf of others, and this underlying reality constantly
resurfaces to determine the logic of many aspects of politics.

Consider the following. During the Howard government era, there was
intense debate about the question of whether the Prime Minister should
apologise to the stolen generations. The question was widely discussed—in
the news, on talkback radio, at the breakfast table, and by parliament. What
is interesting about this is that it was not simply debate about what someone
else should do, even though, strictly speaking, that is exactly what it was—no
one other than the Prime Minister was going to do the actual apologising.
Yet, it was clearly different from the kind of debate we might have about
what, say, the president of another country or the CEO of a large corpora-
tion in which we have no interest, ought to do. That kind of conversation
could be what we call “academic”. This was not academic. Whether the
Prime Minister should apologise was a question that concerned us. And this
is because it was really a question not just about what the Prime Minister
should do, but about what we should do. It was at heart a question about
common action, our action as a people. This is what political representation
is about, in essence. “Representation”, O’Donovan comments, “is not simply
a matter of the elected status of a minister within a democracy. Democracy
itself is founded on the more fundamental political reality that there are
such things as peoples which think through representative citizens and act
through representative officials.”

In these days when political authority and reality television have
embraced, it is not difficult to find the angry protest that “so and so does not
represent me!” This protest, though, is only meaningful because in another
important sense so and so does represent the protestor. If he or she did not,
there would be no reason to be angry. The anger and frustration, and grief,
that accompany the feeling that one’s government is acting in ways that
are at odds with one’s own convictions actually depend upon the reality of
representation. What is at stake is a sense that the identity of the people
who the government represents has suddenly been put in question, and with
it, my sense of belonging. The problem is that although this government is
our government, that is not who I am! What looms on the horizon in such a moment is a feeling of the loss of community. The quest to find evidence that others, too, feel the same way—which we see when following an election people crunch the numbers to show just how many did not agree with and did not vote for the party that has won—represents an understandable attempt to overcome such a sense of disconnection.

At its heart, political representation is not merely about a mechanism by which people become part of a governing body, nor the ongoing processes by which the views of an electorate are received by their members of parliament. Representation is about a relationship between a people and a government, in which a few are entrusted with the task of acting on behalf of the many. Government ministers are sworn in with these words: “I, [so and so], do swear that I will well and truly serve the Commonwealth of Australia in the office of [position]. So help me God!” Representation is about being entrusted with authority to act in the name of the people. This is why it implies responsibility.

**Responsible government in Australia**

To suggest that these reflections have anything to do with what is known as the convention of responsible government might be thought to be an unfortunate blunder. For the notion of responsible government has acquired a specific meaning distinct from the idea of responsibility as we normally understand it. Today, “responsible government” refers in the first instance to the fact that the executive government is drawn from the parliament, and accountable to parliament for its actions. Responsible government has become a way of naming certain procedural aspects of our system of government.

According to A. H. Birch’s classic study, this understanding of responsible government originated in the tumultuous period of British politics in the early nineteenth century. It solidified around three core features: “first, the effective unity of the cabinet; second, effective control of the cabinet by the Prime Minister; and third, the understanding that if the cabinet were defeated in Parliament on a major issue or a vote of confidence, the Prime Minister would have no choice but to resign or ask for a dissolution.” This was a period in which political parties were weak and members highly independent. Leaders of government had to gain and maintain the trust of Parliament, and were vulnerable to losing its confidence. Between 1832 and 1867, the Commons was dissolved at least five times following a government’s
defeat, and numerous other times cabinet resigned without dissolution.\textsuperscript{14} There was a real sense in which Parliament entrusted the executive with authority, and the executive took responsibility for that trust.

This model of responsible government could not survive the expansion of suffrage and the rise of disciplined political parties. In the modern party system, the independent member is the exception, and the government backbench does not combine with the opposition against the executive.\textsuperscript{15} The result is the situation in which we now find ourselves, where the House of Representatives has little ability to hold the government responsible. Critics have spoken of the eclipse of parliament,\textsuperscript{16} and have lamented the demise of responsible government in Australia. David Hamer, for instance, points out that the House has “almost totally abandoned its role as a legislature.” As an example, he recalls that, “during the twelve years from 1976 to 1987, under two different governments, when nearly 2,000 bills were passed, not a single opposition amendment to any of them was accepted.”\textsuperscript{17} Question time is “essentially farcical.” In truth, Hamer argues, “The dominant activity of the House of Representatives, after it has chosen the government, is, in fact, electioneering for the next election.” The reason is clear:

The fundamental problem is whether it is reasonable, with tight party discipline, to expect the same group of people to make a decisive choice of government, and then be an effective critic and scrutineer of the actions of that government. I submit it is not. That is the incisive change in responsible government since the middle of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{18}

Should we lament these developments, though? Malcolm Aldons suggests that fears over the demise of responsible government in Australia are exaggerated. Certainly, he suggests, we cannot expect government to be held accountable by parliament in the way it was in the heyday of British parliament; but nor should we. That form of parliamentary government was possible only through highly restricted suffrage. The advent of truly representative democracy—by which Aldons means the extension of the franchise—means that responsible government must take a different form. Instead, Aldons argues, we ought to think of accountable government. A range of structures, from the media to the Commonwealth Ombudsman, serve to require government to account for and explain its actions in various
ways. Accountability, Aldons says, is “a richer and more valuable concept than the narrow construct of responsible government.”

In Australia, too, responsible government persists through the Senate. Usually hostile to the government, the Senate can be seen to pick up the slack dropped by the House. Indeed, more than pick up the slack: the power to block supply, which infamously led to the end of the Whitlam government, puts the Senate in a powerful position to hold the government to account.

This point, though, shows us where the problem lies. In the classic understanding of responsible government, the decision to accept defeat lay with the government itself. With the power to block supply, however, this decision has been, in a sense, taken out of the government’s hands. The government is not responsible, only held responsible. And here lies the difference between the concepts of responsibility and accountability. Although it is true that “responsible government” came to refer to a specific institutional structure, the term has always gained its meaning from a wider resonance. To speak, in any sense, of a government as responsible implies that it is responsible for something, that government has been entrusted with something, some authority. The value of the idea of responsible government is found in the way it construes the accountability of the executive to parliament in a particular way, and in so doing makes a statement about the task and character of government. The word responsibility preserves a sense that government is a trust in a way that accountability does not. As we have seen, this sense of trust reflects a fundamental aspect of political representation, which is about bearing authority to act on behalf of the people. The retirement of the term “responsible government” will, therefore, be a loss to our political system.

Conclusion

“There is no authority”, wrote the apostle Paul in a passage of enormous significance for the history of Christian political thought, “except from God” (Rom 13:1). Its significance lay in the fact that it spoke of this age, the age beyond Christ’s exaltation but before his return, the time that would be known as the saeculum. In that space, the apostle apparently saw a necessary role for government, for people raised up by God to rule. Yet the role he envisaged is not the role that rulers—the Roman emperors of Paul’s day especially, but also rulers down to our own day—so naturally crave, namely, the role of being the saviours of their people. Instead, the apostle described a
chastened, modest role: “the authority is God’s servant, for your good” (Rom 13:4). As he put it elsewhere, their task was simply to protect the space for people to “live peaceable and quiet lives” (1 Tim 2:2). And so the governing authorities were worthy of respect and taxes, but not of devotion (Rom 13:5–7; 1 Pet 2:13–17). To represent a people as their government is thus to be placed in a perilous position. It is to bear an authority that comes from God, an authority to act in the name of the whole people. Yet, in this age, that authority can only be borne with fear and trembling, because, as the earliest Christians so clearly saw (consider again the use of Psalm 2 in Acts 4:24–30), a king has arisen who represents his people perfectly, and whose rule will never fail. To represent a people, without obscuring their vision of that king, and his work, is the fearful responsibility with which government, even in our day, is entrusted. To the extent that our political institutions recognise this vision of political authority, they reflect the truth of things. That is why the convention of responsible government is a gift, the loss of which should be lamented.

Endnotes

2 All biblical quotations are from the New International Version (2011).
3 It should be noted here that the idea of Christ being our representative is not in tension with the idea that he is our substitute. Representation and substitution are not alternatives; rather, substitution is a mode of representation. One cannot be a true substitute apart from being a representative.
7 Hobbes, Leviathan, chapter 19.


13 Birch, *Representative and Responsible Government*, 133.


18 Hamer, “Can Responsible Government Survive in Australia?”

19 Aldons, “Responsible, Representative and Accountable Government,” 40.