



## Who can represent us?

Patrick Riordan SJ

Whenever you cast your vote at the ballot box, why do you think that the person for whom you vote is best able to 'represent' you? As the nominated candidates continue to campaign to become the next Labour Party leader, Patrick Riordan SJ surveys different notions of representation and how they have developed, and describes how they find a place in a wider theological drama.

Five candidates have now secured their place on the ballot to become the next leader of the Labour Party. Key to each of their campaigns, as with all bids for political office, are the reasons why they consider themselves to be suitable for the post. Those reasons take two forms: what they stand for – their vision and policy proposals – and who they are. The reasons that fall under the latter criterion are considered particularly important for the task of representing constituents. In the current context of the Labour Party, one challenge for the next leader is to win back those traditional Labour strongholds that returned a Conservative MP in the 2019 General Election. Who is best suited to represent once again those crumbling blocks in the northern 'red wall'? As the candidates make the case for themselves, it is noticeable that they invoke different notions of representation, and further reflection reminds us of the theological origins of some of these notions.

Is similarity a criterion for representation? Does a representative have to resemble the people she represents? For some candidates this appears to be important as they draw attention to their geographic and cultural background, their language and accent, and underline how much they are at home among 'their' people. This notion has echoes in representative art, as we judge a statue or a painting to be 'a good likeness'. The artwork succeeds in representing the intended subject, because it succeeds in conveying the impression of their characteristic features. Caricaturists exploit this phenomenon by highlighting and

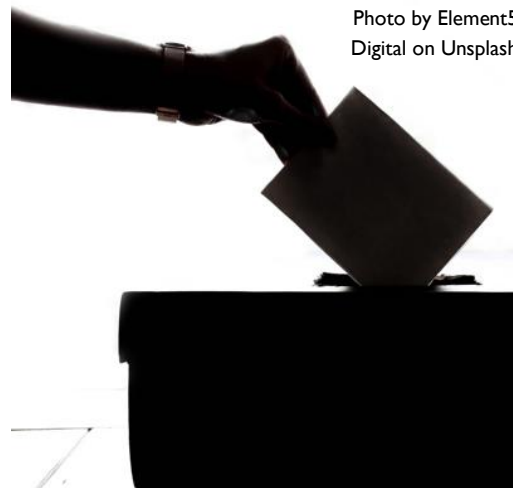


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exaggerating a distinct feature. Art is one field, but should its criterion of representation apply in the social and political arena? At times in history, it has been an effective argument. Advocates for parliamentary government challenged the capacity of a monarch to represent her subjects. Royalty, wealth and privilege meant that monarchs could not share in the experience of ordinary people, and so could not adequately represent them.

This thought recurs in contemporary polemic against privileged elites holding office, which often comes, ironically, from members of such elites who present themselves as champions of ordinary people. If the ermine-garbed monarch could not represent his kingdom, lacking the likeness of his subjects, a parliament could do so, it was argued, not merely because its members were chosen from among the people but also because with its diversity and multiplicity of characters it would better reflect the reality of society as a whole and be a better likeness.

Likeness, however, is not everyone's idea of representation. The representative should be chosen by those to be represented, and their free choice would not necessarily select for what could be a superficial similarity. Shared interests might be more crucial. To hold goods and values in common does not necessarily depend on having a similar background or upbringing. Solidarity in embracing a common cause can unite people from very different backgrounds and so 'what one stands for' can be the distinguishing feature of 'who' one is, and who one

can represent. This has become the more critical filter in democratic political systems that rely on distinctive parties with opposed ideologies.

Another perspective on representation goes beyond likeness and shared interests to the simple fact of choice, of being chosen, for whatever reason the choosers may have. Those are the representatives of their constituents whom the constituents themselves have chosen. The usual objection to this line of thought, however, is that in many instances one has no choice, or only a very restricted choice (there being no alternative), and so the argument falls back on the notion of a tacit choice. Once people are considered to have accepted their representative, then that suffices to qualify the candidate. Of course, Royalists who fared badly on the likeness and solidarity criteria could appeal to this notion of representation, since the people evidently accepted those qualified by royal descent as their monarch.

Popular acceptance of domination by royalty could not satisfy the critics who sought a purer understanding of representation, one that included the possibility of rejection along with acceptance. The notion of authorisation, linked to the relationship between an author and her work, provided a metaphor that survives in the concept of authority. Those who exercise choice in the selection of their representative could be said to be authors of all that the representative chooses to enact, so that they 'authorise' what she does. Furthermore, that representative now enjoys authority and entitlement to the obedience of subjects because they have authorised to do so in that role by the people.

But, it can be asked, why should the people as a whole be the ultimate authority, the sovereign authority? A traditional answer to this question highlighted an alternative source of authority, namely divine anointing. Selection by God, both by heredity and by ceremonial anointing, designated the one who should bear authority for the good of the people. We are not likely to find an appeal to a divine sovereign in the debates surrounding the choice of a Labour Party leader, but there may well be appeal to the tenets of socialism that perform a parallel function to that of sacred scripture in specifying a higher purpose, a sovereign will.

Different notions of representation that were worked out in historical disputes will have their echoes in contemporary contexts, in which the relationship between the represented and their representative is expressed. Resemblance, solidarity in common interests, being chosen or accepted, authorised or anointed; all of these suggest aspects of the relationship that might exist between candidates and constituents. It is not necessary to select one model and it is good to be aware of all of them so that voters can explore the full range of reasons as they make their selection.

It will not come as much of a surprise that the notions we rely on in contemporary political disputes have their precedents in political controversies of the past, such as the seventeenth century disputes between Royalists and Parliamentarians. In fact, the disputes from which these concepts of representation first arose were theological in nature. They had to do with humanity's need for redemption – a need understood to result from the sin of Adam in which all of humankind is thought to be involved – and the offer of salvation, new life in Christ, as the solution to that need. Explaining the mysteries of sin and redemption, the drama of the first Adam and the Second Adam, required a clarification of how they could be considered to be representatives of humankind as whole. What could it mean to say that the biblical figure of Adam represents all of humanity with real consequences for humanity's condition? And what does it mean to see in Jesus the preeminent representative on whom depends the salvation of all?<sup>1</sup>

Without going into the reconstruction of the previous theological debates, it is perhaps helpful to explore the ways in which Jesus can be seen to be a representative for all of humanity. The four different notions of representation noted above can be applied to him. At Christmas, we celebrated the mystery of the Incarnation, the [Word becoming flesh](#). Liturgical prayers emphasised that the Son of God becomes truly human as the son of Mary. It is not play-acting, it is not a matter of appearances; Jesus is really one of us, and that theme is repeated both in the narrated stories, and in the reflective language of sharing our nature. Because he is one of us, descended from Adam, from David, from Mary, he bears our likeness; he resembles those whom he can represent as their

redeemer and saviour. He is 'like us in all things but sin' and so with that resemblance, which the Letter to the Hebrews (2:14-18) stresses, he can approach God his Father on our behalf. He is tempted in all ways that we are, he suffers betrayal and abandonment as so many of us do, he suffers physical pain and torment, and finally, as all mortals must do, he dies and is buried. Resemblance is central to the understanding of his representative function.

Solidarity rooted in shared interests, bonds of compassion with suffering humanity also qualify Jesus as a representative of humankind. Those values that characterise not only his words but above all his actions mark him out as united with what is best in us. He speaks of friendship and love, and shows us how to be friends and lovers. He speaks of mercy and compassion, and shows us how to be merciful and caring. He bristles at injustice and pleads for righteousness, and challenges those who do not act accordingly. His words of peace are accompanied by acts of forgiveness, healing and reconciliation. There is a double solidarity in both experiencing the worst that life can throw at us, and striving for and exemplifying the best that we can be. With these characteristic features, Jesus is recognisably a representative based on sharing the interests and common goods of humankind.

The New Testament texts underline the manner in which Jesus is to be acknowledged as the anointed one of God. His public ministry begins with the baptism scene at the Jordan where he is anointed with the Spirit and the voice of the Father proclaims him as the beloved Son (Matthew 3:13-17). Luke's Gospel presents Jesus as claiming for himself the messianic project outlined by the prophet Isaiah: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me ...' (Luke 4:18-21). Designated, authorised by a higher power, Jesus exhibits those features of a proper representative worthy of the loyalty and obedience of his followers.

The feature of representation least likely to apply to Jesus is the selection by those represented. It is not the fact of having been chosen by an electorate that qualifies Jesus as representative of humankind. And yet without the choice of those who in freedom decide to join him he would be without followers. He offers himself to all whom he meets, and his disciples take on the same task of presenting Jesus as one who invites acceptance 'for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12). The [prologue to John's Gospel](#) put it succinctly: 'to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God' (John 1:12).

In politics as it is practised today, we periodically have the opportunity to choose our representatives and commission them on our behalf to serve the common good. The language we have available to us for speaking about representation is rich, rooted in a complex history. But it is also deeply theological in its origins, and so it can provoke reflection about a more fundamental and a more permanent form of representation than that realised in periodic elections and parliamentary terms. And perhaps, on the other hand, those selected to exercise political responsibility may be helped to modify their claims and promises when seeing them in the context of a larger drama of representation.

*Patrick Riordan SJ is Senior Fellow for Political Philosophy and Catholic Social Thought at Campion Hall, University of Oxford.*

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<sup>1</sup> A recent book reviews the theological origins of the various notions of representation that were elaborated in the disputes. The first two chapters of Eric Nelson's *The Theology of Liberalism: Political Philosophy and the Justice of God* (Harvard University Press, 2019) elaborate the theological sources of political debates that persist to the present.