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Paradise

By: Michael Jacobson

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Ongoing world events are placing political systems under increasing scrutiny as people demand a change to democracy. Gold Coast academic Professor Stephen Stockwell is part of a global discussion about democracy's merits and history

words: **michael jacobson**

living in interesting times

There's an ancient Chinese expression, a curse more accurately, which says: may you live in interesting times.

Stephen Stockwell adjusts his glasses, leans back in his chair, grins and, keenly aware of the understatement, observes: "Interesting times? I think it's fair to say that's the current state of play."

Professor Stockwell is a big, friendly bear of a bloke whose ready laugh and quick wit sometimes belie the seriousness of his conversations.

As a member of the Griffith Centre for Cultural Research and the former head of the School of Humanities at Griffith University-Gold Coast, the academic is accustomed to healthy and charged social, political and cultural debates.

Today the subject for discussion is democracy, which encompasses all three notions and of late has encouraged substantial and sometimes deadly serious international attention.

For example, in the ever turbulent Middle East, anti-government movements in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, Sudan and Yemen have achieved varying degrees of success in their efforts to hasten the implementation of political change.

In the United States, new political groups such as the conservative Tea Party movement are challenging President Barack Obama's broad reform agenda and, with the Republicans in tandem, have secured a congressional majority to give American democracy its sternest test in years.

On a more positive note for President Obama, his influence proved pivotal in striking what's been described as a vital blow for the cause of modern democracy, namely the killing of Osama bin Laden.

In Australia, the democratic processes have endured sharper scrutiny than normal, thanks to three major political events: the dumping of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2010 and the anointing of Julia Gillard in his place; the deal brokered between the Labor Party and independent MPs to ensure Labor retained government after the 2010 federal election; and the arrangement by which former Brisbane lord mayor Campbell Newman assumed leadership of the Liberal National Party despite not holding a seat in the Queensland Parliament.

Even recent Gold Coast community outrage and action against the despised and perceived tyrant that is water retailer Allconnex are exercises in the pursuit and expression of democratic rights.

"All governments by nature need to be tested in the democratic system. That's what keeps them fresh, new and strong," says Professor Stockwell,

sipping from a mug emblazoned with the slogan 'You're Fired!'.

"The greatest success of democracy is in the change of government without bloodshed. As some current examples now demonstrate, this is not always possible.

"However, even though people are within their rights to denigrate democracy, I still hold it to be the system that allows people, and encourages people, to do and be better.

"I'm not saying other systems are hopeless. It's just that they do less to develop the human potential of their constituents.

"And the question arising from that is this: how do we improve democracy?"

It's a good question, not merely because it

conjures memories of that famous quote from the famously quotable Sir Winston Churchill in 1947: "No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

If Churchill was correct then and remains so now, one way to fathom the need, stature, context and operation of democracy is to examine its history.

Professor Stockwell and several academic colleagues have done precisely that in *The Secret History of Democracy*, a new volume of essays bulging with – to steal the professor's own words – fresh, new and strong ideas.

The strongest of these relates to the notion that democracy, or at least variations on the theme, existed long before accepted wisdom's contention that it was a political and philosophical construct developed by the ancient Greeks.

Contributors to the book posit theories that democracy was developing in the Middle East, India and China well before classical Athens; persevered during the Dark Ages in Islam, in Iceland and Venice; was often part of tribal life in Africa, North America and among Australia's Aborigines; and continues to evolve today under various forms of political activism.

"The idea that democracy could have a secret history might at first seem strange," say Professor

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Stockwell and his co-editor, Deakin University's Benjamin Isakhan.

"Indeed the history of democracy has become so standardised, is so familiar and appears so complete that it is hard to believe it could hold any secrets.

"(But) there is much more to the history of democracy than the foreshortened genealogy admits. There is a whole secret history, too big, complex and insufficiently Western in character to be included in the standard narrative."

Stephen Stockwell thanks his grandparents for helping form his opinions about democracy. He says their various associations and engagement improved the quality of his life and that of their society.

His political idealism developed further during his student days in Brisbane in the 1970s and 1980s when he participated in protests against the National Party government dominated by then Queensland premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen.

Obviously, Professor Stockwell's leanings favour the left of the political agenda and he remembers those days as particularly tough for young objectors.

At a time when Bjelke-Petersen discerned dissent in people having the audacity to walk three abreast down the street, the young Stockwell was striving to spread the message of activism and ignite the ardour of the masses.

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He did so as a program co-ordinator and journalist for radio station 4ZZZ – he also worked as a journalist for the ABC's *Four Corners* program – and most raucously as a member of the early '80s Brisbane punk band Black Assassins.

"We were as much about political theatre as the music, thanks to the restrictions applied during Joh's era," he recalls.

"Frankly, it wasn't considered a successful gig unless the police came.

"Our songs were all political, with very few ballads as you might imagine. We even supported the Dead Kennedys at Festival Hall in about 1983.

"The overriding theme of what we were doing was to exercise our democratic rights and express our discontent with the abject political situation in Queensland at that time.

"The government was corrupt, as we were saying, and the police were corrupt, as we were saying, but the common wisdom was it was all too entrenched and too much to change.

"The thing is, to my mind such thinking should never be an excuse to stop striving for change when change is so patently required."

Fortunately, and despite the power of the Bjelke-Petersen regime, the essential value of democracy remained vibrant in enough minds.

"In the demonstrations and marches there was an insistence on democratic rights and opposition to what was happening built to a point where it was irresistible," recalls Professor Stockwell.

"Political figures like Wayne Goss, Matt Foley, Peter Beattie and Anna Bligh came up during those years and Joh and his cronies eventually were taken down."

All true, but as a staunch leftie what does Professor Stockwell make of today's mood of discontent towards the current Labor state government? Are demands for its demise not just reasonable, but also irresistible?

"Democracy is built on the idea of improvement. People have a right to be dissatisfied, just as others have a right not to agree with them," he says.

"Out of dissatisfaction comes action. Out of action can come change. Democracy embraces both and that's clear throughout history.

"Best examples? The brief rise of the so-called Paris Commune in 1871 saw the working classes take power. Catalonia flourished as a democracy during the 1930s Spanish Civil War and there was the widespread social and political change in the US, UK and Australia after World War II."

Meanwhile, now that democracy is becoming a buzzword in regions where formerly it seemed the least

likely of political systems to exist, let alone prevail, Professor Stockwell again refers to perhaps the concept's greatest strength: respect for the power of the people.

"I suppose the book, in many ways, comes from what happened in Iraq and the question that follows from that concerns whether democracy could ever flourish there?" he says.

"Throughout history, and that means not just the Greeks, democracy can be seen in the way people have sought to reclaim their rights and then have a say in the making of their history.

"Today there is an appreciation that democracy is the political alternative of choice.

"People feel the need to replace jaded, corrupt and oppressive systems with something else, anything else sometimes, and most times democracy is the one they choose."

With the surge in online communications and moves towards a more globalised economy, Professor Stockwell believes it's possible for democracy to open up to a much broader canvas.

"Social networks like Facebook and Twitter may not be the most ideal channels for discussion, but they do make global conversations and that can lead to interesting new ways of



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doing democracy.

“History shows there will always be someone, some group of like-minded people, prepared to question leadership and demand accountability or change.

“Therein lies the strength of democracy. At its best it reinforces our sense of what is ours and, within that, the force of community involvement is never to be understated or undermined.”

Just as nations and leaders change, so must democracy.

The Secret History of Democracy reveals a malleable concept always available to find its place in a society if society invites and administers it.

History also confirms the practice of democracy is not without constant challenges. These persist today.

“When systems aren’t perfect, this can centralise change and provide new ways of doing democracy,” says Professor Stockwell.

“In the US, for example, since the 1960s there has been a loss of faith in

the general effectiveness of political institutions and now the best the US seems to be able to muster is to go backwards slowly.

“Here in Australia, we face many challenges in managing the diversity of our society and putting substance into our claim that we welcome people from afar.

“Multiculturalism for its own sake is not special. However, it can make a better and more democratic Australia and I believe we must strive for that.

“We are on the edge of a lot of turbulence and how we adapt will be a true test for our democracy.

“It depends on people becoming involved, street by street and community by community, because the danger to democracy is the desire within some people to be separate, isolationist and exclusive.”

The Secret History of Democracy offers hope for democracy.

It comes via the virtues democracy has demonstrated over 5000 years in settings as small as villages and as large as nations; in nurturing people’s

sense of ownership of democracy; and by creating awareness of the breadth of democracy’s history and potential.

“In the balance between the pragmatic and the personal,” write Professor Stockwell and his editorial colleague Benjamin Isakhan, “there is an opportunity to discern the basis for the common decency and group solidarity that lies at the heart of making democracy work.

“It is in the complex and varied processes we use to negotiate this terrain that human individuals find their powers and limitations reflected in the responses of others.

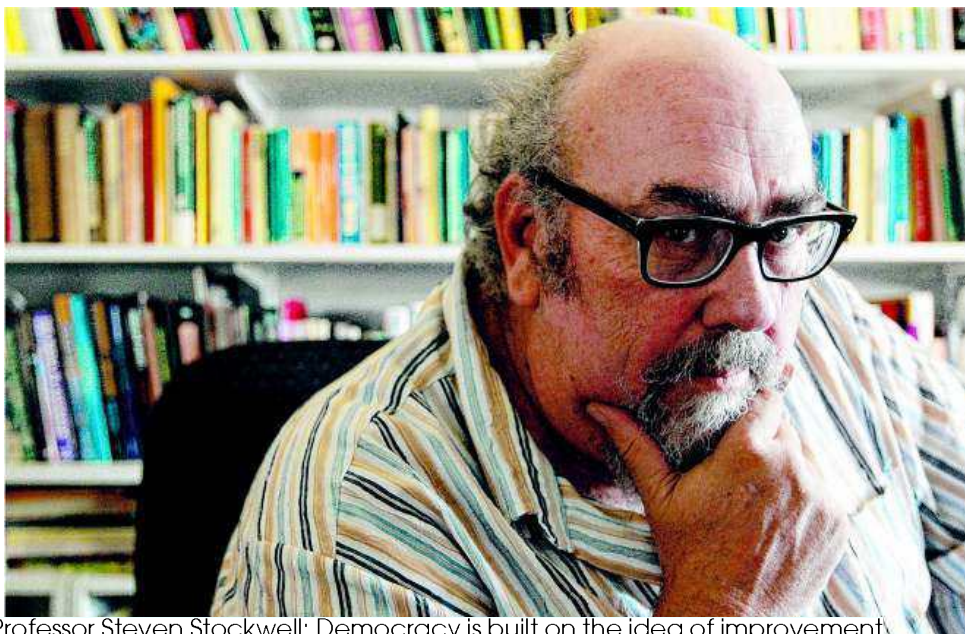
“The alternative is the socio-pathology that refuses to listen, denies negotiation, ignores the needs of fellow humans and ends in violence or despotism.”

Interesting times indeed.

The Secret History of Democracy, edited by Benjamin Isakhan and Stephen Stockwell, is published by Palgrave Macmillan



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Professor Steven Stockwell: Democracy is built on the idea of improvement