



IDEAS It appears that democracy was born not in Greece but in the ancient assemblies of Syria-Mesopotamia. **Paul Pickering** turns the pages of a breathtaking history.

A wordly view of political history

The Life and Death of Democracy

By John Keane

Simon & Schuster, \$49.99

THERE is a cruel irony in the fact that John Keane must have been tapping out this monumental study of the global history of democracy, the first such study for 100 years, at the same time as US bombs were raining down on Baghdad as part of a campaign that aimed, at least in part, to bestow the benefits of democracy upon the Iraqi people.

Keane is alive to this irony, drawing attention to one of George W. Bush's more memorable non sequiturs. "Iraq must be democratic," Bush told a group of workers in Ohio. "We will not impose a government on Iraq."

The irony and the tragedy are redoubled when, a handful of pages into the book, Keane reveals one of its most startling conclusions: the origins of democracy lay in the East, in what is now Syria, Iran and Iraq.

As the author of acclaimed biographies of Paine and Havel and one of the world's foremost chroniclers of what is known in the halls of the academy of social sciences as "civil society", Keane was always going to write this book. We should be thankful that he has.

Only those readers familiar with the breadth and depth of research involved in completing an account such as this can truly appreciate the magnitude of Keane's achievement.

The scope of the book is breathtaking, spanning thousands of years and lighting upon every corner of the globe. It is rich with fine-grained detail, but even after nearly 900 pages the reader (or this reader at least) never gets the impression that Keane is desperately trying to fit everything in.

The narrative is accessible, surprising, engaging and entertaining. There is even the occasional joke; giving a lie to the fact that political history is boring and never funny.

Keane identifies three broad phases in the history of democracy: assembly democracy, representative democracy and, since 1945, "monitory democracy". If you have not heard of the latter, it is hardly surprising: Keane is using a term that has had limited exposure, although the gist of the concept will be familiar. "Monitory democracy," he tells us, is a "variety of post-parliamentary politics defined by the rapid growth of many different kinds of extra-parliamentary, power-scrutinising mechanisms".

The future of democracy is, he argues, "surveys, focus groups, deliberative polling, online petitions and audience and customer voting". Keane recognises that "monitory democracy" is in a formative and fragile state and, consequently, the case for its capacity to save democracy from the clutches of politicians

is provisional. He is optimistic (the tone of the whole book is) and perhaps overly sanguine. The evidence is not convincing that we should sleep easier protected by blogs rather than by ballots.

For me, the heart of the book comes earlier, in the 600 pages devoted to a fundamental re-evaluation of the history of democracy from the ancient world to its miraculous triumph in 1945. Keane's conviction is still clear during these pages – he is a passionate democrat — but his authorial voice is less inflected with the enthusiastic timbre he reserves for the humble monitors "beneath and beyond in the institutions of territorial states".

It is difficult to summarise in a few words the riches of this narrative and the multitude of shibboleths slain therein. A few examples must suffice. In the section devoted to "representational democracy", covering the period from the 10th century to the victory of democracy over the forces of totalitarianism, for example, Keane points out that the American revolutionaries were the heirs of the Romans rather than the Greeks, and not in any sense keen on democracy.

This observation may offend many sensibilities in the US (certainly among general readers schooled in the "dogma of Western



democracy” as opposed to those few immersed in political theory), but it is the Greeks who will be most outraged by another of Keane’s new historical insights. Readers accustomed to the idea that the original democrats wore Hellenic chitons and that their invention developed hand in hand with Western civilisation might also be surprised. Discussing “assembly democracy”, Keane suggests the Greeks were, in fact, plagiarisers. The lamp of the democracy, he insists, was lit in the East, in the “ancient assemblies of Syria-Mesopotamia” and developed in, among other places, the new institution at the heart of Islamic society, the mosque.

Keane follows the inevitably

provisional account of “monitory democracy” with an attempt to predict the future. Under the disconcertingly ambiguous rubric “inventing history”, Keane uses the persona of a historian 50 years hence to ponder outcomes as yet unknown.

He is a talented wordsmith and he summons all of his considerable prowess to encourage us to “drink from the river of memory from an imagined moment in the future”. The strategy produces some moments of insight and powerful questions wrapped up in wonderful turns of phrase, but in the end, it is perhaps unnecessary. The illuminating moments of enduring value in these 150 pages are usually called a

conclusion.

The product of a decade of research and writing, this is a work of enduring importance. Keane is, as noted at the outset, the first scholar for 100 years to attempt this monumental task, and it may well be that it is another century before a scholar has the combination of skill, opportunity and courage to attempt it again.

But this is not the reason why the book will surely endure. On almost every page, Keane poses a critical question pointing to the need for further research and thought. He does so in a spirit of generosity that represents a warm invitation to join the conversation.



Barack Obama . . . democracy US style.

PICTURE: AP



John Keane is a guest at the Melbourne Writers Festival. Professor Paul Pickering is convener of graduate studies at the Research School of Humanities at the Australian National University.