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#400: Phantom democracies: John Keane on the New Global Despotism

VOICEOVER

This is Up Close, the research talk show from the University of Melbourne, Australia.

PETER MARES

Hello, I'm Peter Mares, thanks for joining us. Churchill famously described democracy as the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time. Lurking behind the humour is an assumption that democracy is the best system human beings have so far devised to organise their affairs. By implication, social progress in countries across the globe will lead towards democracy because this gives people both what they want and what's best for them. Countries may experiment with other options, but they'll eventually be discarded as inadequate and democracy will prevail. But is this a naïve view, perhaps even a dangerous delusion? Does it foster complacency about the inevitable spread of democratic ideals and practices, as if politics ran on rails towards a certain destination.

Today's guest on Up Close says, a democratic future is far from assured. In fact, he identifies a rise of despotism around the world. John Keane is Professor of Politics at the University of Sydney and the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin. He convenes the Sydney Democracy Network and is one of the world's leading writers on the history, theory and practice of democracy. He's written numerous books, including *A Short History of the Future of Democracy* and *The Life and Death of Democracy*. John Keane is in Melbourne as a guest of the EU Centre on Shared Complex Challenges. John Keane, welcome to Up Close.

JOHN KEANE

It's my pleasure to be here, Peter.

PETER MARES

So despotism, it's an old-fashioned word, not much used these days. What do you mean by despotism?

JOHN KEANE

It's a spine-tingling word I have discovered in recent months and years. It has very

old roots. Its genealogy stretches back at least to the ancient Greeks where the despot's was the head of a household, the father of a household who looked after, took care of, won the hearts, the loyalty of women and children and slaves in the household. The term was revived during late Medieval Europe to refer to eastern regimes; India, China, what was known about them. During that period, from say the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the term despotism had quite a life in which there were strongly orientalist connotations. The east is barbaric, there is servitude, there is darkness, there are strange things that happen, these are regimes that tyrannise people, whereas Europe is different.

PETER MARES

Enlightened.

JOHN KEANE

Becoming enlightened, lawful, monarchies and so on. The critical moment in the life of this term is in the second half of the eighteenth century where the term undergoes another change of meaning and becomes revolutionary. Montesquieu is the great figure; French, liberal, parliamentarian, a champion of the view that Europe is increasingly in danger of a modern form of top-down rule that, so to say, comes from the east. That idea is central to the American Revolution, it's central to the French Revolution, where the idea is that monarchs in Europe are becoming blind, bullying and they are violating constitutions and need to be overthrown.

PETER MARES

So losing touch with the people, losing touch with the needs of the nation and the interests of the people and so on, and becoming more tyrannical, despotic indeed.

JOHN KEANE

With a twist. Because in that period - the second half of the eighteenth century is very clear - the great fear that the word generates, the great fear of despotism in practice, is that this is a top-down, bullying, fear-inducing type of polity that, nevertheless, manages to win the loyalty of significant parts of the population, its subject population. So despotism is a system of voluntary servitude. It manages, in various ways, to generate loyalty among powerless subjects, loyalty to the despot and to the system of despotism. That's a meaning of the word that I am trying to recover in a kind of pearl-diving exercise. To recover this old term, to change its meaning for the twenty-first century, where that problem of voluntary servitude, that loyalty of relatively powerless people to top-down power is central to the problem.

PETER MARES

So you're trying to recover this because you want to talk about contemporary developments.

JOHN KEANE

I do.

PETER MARES

So let's illustrate this then with an example of what you would see as contemporary despotism in the world today, a country that you would now describe as having a despotic regime.

JOHN KEANE

Well I think the emerging new despotisms of the twenty-first century are not understandable in terms of, let's say, African-style dictatorships.

PETER MARES

Where the military seizes control and the General sets himself up as the leader.

JOHN KEANE

And there is top-down corruption with a small kleptocracy.

PETER MARES

That is, people on the take in government sort of profiting from their position.

JOHN KEANE

And where violence is the ultimate resource for maintaining the stability of the regime. The new despotisms of the twenty-first century - they include Russia, China, some of the Central Asian republics, the Gulf States, Vietnam, Cambodia, Belarus, Hungary, potentially Poland; the numbers grow - are regimes where those who govern understand that support for institutions is only durable if people are loyal to those institutions, and so they invent mechanisms for cultivating this loyalty. An example is internet policy - the Iranians and the Chinese Governments are probably at the cutting edge - where the censorship model that most people like to think in terms of doesn't apply.

PETER MARES

This would be the old-fashioned model where?

JOHN KEANE

Repression.

PETER MARES

When I lived in Vietnam, for example, just certain pages of international newspapers would be blacked out.

JOHN KEANE

Correct. That still goes on, but in the field of the internet, there are attempts to develop online public forums, live-streamed meetings of officials with citizens, watching mechanisms, rumour-detection mechanisms, 50-cent bloggers. The attempt, in other words, to draw citizens into a system of internet control where there is some sense of ownership among the subjects of those regimes, some sense of ownership of the internet, and where there's a measure of freedoms, where there are digital storms that break out.

PETER MARES

So in this sense, that the citizens of these despotic regimes actually have some influence, some say. So the regime is both using the internet, let's say in online forums, both to monitor and gauge, but also to engage the populace so that they?

JOHN KEANE

Correct.

PETER MARES

?have a sense that they're being heard, their voices are heard, they can have an impact and so on.

JOHN KEANE

Those who rule these despotisms understand the limits of the old maxim of Mao Zedong, that political power ultimately grows from the barrel of a gun. These rulers understand that violence is a limited tool for ensuring loyalty. That much more effective, much more durable is the experiment with forms, with institutional forms, new mechanisms and tools for actually encouraging voluntary servitude among?

PETER MARES

So this is how you would distinguish this kind of new despotism from say military regimes, totalitarian regimes, other types of authoritarian regimes where the primary way in which the populace is kept in check is through the violence of the state or the organ of the state.

JOHN KEANE

Yes, these are much more sophisticated forms of top-down power. They are all engaged in a kind of learning process, they try to learn how better to rule. They are not describable - it's a common mistake - as, for example, kleptocracies. I think John McCain, Senator McCain, famously said?

PETER MARES

The US Senator and former presidential candidate.

JOHN KEANE

?yes, that Putin's Russia was merely a gas station masquerading as a state. Karen Dawisha, one of the important scholars of Putin's Russia, says that Russia is a kleptocracy.

PETER MARES

The implication there is that Putin is simply milking Russia for all its worth, he won't be there long - which he already has been there a long time - he's just reaping the benefits. You say it's much more complicated than that.

JOHN KEANE

And, therefore, the best way to deal with Putin's Russia is to apply sanctions on the presumption that that inner group around Putin will eventually give up or go out of

business?

PETER MARES

Or replace him.

JOHN KEANE

?and the whole regime will collapse. I think it's a serious mis-description of how these despotisms work. Because one thing that is clear is that they show signs of durability, because those who govern at all levels in these top-down systems of power understand the need for cultivating this loyalty, this support among the population. They do this not only through the internet, they do this through a whole range of other mechanisms.

PETER MARES

You're suggesting there then, if Putin disappeared from Russia, that wouldn't be the end of despotism in Russia. This is not a cult of personality either, this is not associated with one particular leader and that leader's way of doing things.

JOHN KEANE

That's right and I think that the reasons run pretty wide and they need to be understood. Because these are regimes, to repeat, that seem to me to have a durability. They are serious competitors of power-sharing, constitutional democracy that we've gotten used to in the last generation. For instance, all of these regimes are systems of clientelism - blut is the Russian word, guanxi is the Chinese word - to describe a very labyrinthine, complicated, vertical mosaic of connections. If you want to get anything done - getting a driver's licence in Moscow, running a business, a large business - you've got to be well connected. Patron-client relations are a very basic ingredient of the system. That means that everybody from top to bottom - from that encounter at the bottom with the policeman who asks you for a bribe, to the very top - it means that everybody is drawn in to a kind of spider's web of connections and everybody is implicated, nobody is freed of that system. That has a certain democratic feel about it; we're all in this together.

An example, under Putin around about 50 percent of the population of Russia is now dependent upon state spending, their daily lives are dependent on state spending. These are welfare payments, these are transfers that are entirely examples of blut, of connections. Poverty rates have dropped. The dependence of the population through connections on the state has grown enormously. That's true for China, it's true for the rest of these regimes. There are other qualities that tend to produce loyalty to the regime. The way that, for example, those who govern at all levels increasingly rely on techniques of cultivating a sort of media appearance. Xi Jinping and Peng Liyuan?

PETER MARES

Chinese leaders.

JOHN KEANE

?the first lady of China, Putin on his Harley Davidson or on an ice-hockey rink.

PETER MARES

Often with his shirt off.

JOHN KEANE

Yes, these are examples of the way that those who govern understand that it's important for them to be seen by the bulk of the population as champions of the dignity of the nation, protectors of the nation. Actually, leaders who are not totally corrupted but leaders who are deserving of the loyalty of the citizens of those regimes.

PETER MARES

Yeah.

JOHN KEANE

You get the picture that these are not just dictatorships, they're not autocracies, they're not authoritarian regimes.

PETER MARES

Although they are authoritarian in character. They're despotic, so they are authoritarian, but we can't simply describe them as authoritarian regimes, that's your point.

JOHN KEANE

My problem with the word authoritarian and authoritarianism is that the term authoritarianism was coined by Samuel Huntington around 1970. If you go back and look at what he understood by that term, which has now become the standard term for describing these regimes, the particular problem is that authoritarianism differs from democracy - always liberal democracy with an American accent - because free and fair elections happen in democracies and they don't in authoritarian regimes. The problem I have is that the measure of the quality of these despotisms is American-style liberal democracy; that is becoming very implausible given what is going on in the United States. But the word authoritarianism is a mis-description because there are many, so to say, democratic qualities of these despotisms, including the fact they hold elections.

More than a million elections have been held at the local level in China since the end of the '80s and the party is using elections to diffuse conflicts even in cities. All despots stage elections and they typically win them. Of course there's corruption and of course there's manipulation of results. Why do they do this? Why do they hold elections? The term authoritarianism simply turns its back on this phenomenon.

PETER MARES

From the point of view of that language of authoritarianism, the assumption would be they hold elections purely for show, this is a sham thing. But you're saying the elections in China or Russia or other despotic regimes are more than that, they're not just about show.

JOHN KEANE

They have several functions. They allow disagreements to surface at the very top.

PETER MARES

Within a confined and controlled?

JOHN KEANE

Yes.

PETER MARES

?manner.

JOHN KEANE

They are mechanisms of attracting new blood into the ruling groups. They are mechanisms for de-legitimizing, destroying competitor parties, because if you continually lose elections that just goes to show that you don't have any public legitimacy. Not to be underestimated, to say is the fact that the razzamatazz of these elections is a great spectacle, a great show for demonstrating that those who rule, rule with the support of the people. By the way, one of the qualities of all of these despotisms is that those who rule at all levels, constantly go on about the people. The people are the source of sovereign power. This is the sense in which these despotisms have a democratic quality to them - and I put that in quotation marks. You could describe them as phantom democracies. By that I mean not that they're just fake, it is that there is a lived feeling among the population that there is some consent that's given to those who rule over them.

Why is it that, according to the reliable opinion polls, some 80 percent of Chinese citizens feel that they live in a democracy? Is this because they're brainwashed or somehow hoodwinked, turned into idiots who understand nothing about power? No, I think it's because the combination of elections and the references to the people, the experiment with internet forums, the reliance of rulers on opinion polls - they all do this - all imbue the regime with a sense that those who rule, rule in the name of people and for the benefits of people.

PETER MARES

So, John Keane, you've identified these characteristics. If I can add one more, it would seem to be that a strong nationalism seems to be characteristic of all of them. Within these despotic regimes, they mobilise nationalism. Is that a fair comment?

JOHN KEANE

Most of them do, though I think that lurking in that dynamic is the politics of dignity. What these despotisms do is encourage the population to feel that their dignity is respected, that there is a cultivation of dignity.

PETER MARES

In a sense, for example in China, of the great history of China and its great achievements of China over generations and so on, that sort of thing?

JOHN KEANE

Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin have both persuaded significant parts of the population they rule over that they dignity of, respectively, Chinese and Russian people is being restored to its rightful place. That's a very important force. Whether these despotisms are to be understood as nationalist is, I think, an open question. My own view is that another distinctive feature of these despotisms is the way that those who rule do so through a kind of vaudeville politics. Vaudeville was a type of entertainment in the 1920s and '30s where there were jugglers and fire eaters and?

PETER MARES

A variety show type thing.

JOHN KEANE

?yes, and strong men and beauties and lion tamers. These regimes tend to avoid a single language through which they rule. So Peter Pomerantsev, a wonderful Russian journalist who is now in exile in London and who's written an extraordinary book on the language of Putinism and how it works through the media, points out that around lunchtime in Moscow you can feel as though you're living in a democracy. There are times when things happen and there's a demonstration and there's an outburst on one of the television stations. By mid-afternoon you're feeling that you're in a monarchy. By early evening it feels like an autocracy. By the time you go to bed it feels totalitarian. All in one day. It's a metaphor for describing the kind of syncretism, the kaleidoscopic quality of the language.

China is a very good example. Yes, there's a lot of talk of the return and the dignity of the Guójiá, the nation. But there's talk of ancient Chinese civilisations, there's talk of socialism, there's talk of democracy, there's talk of the people, there's talk of the importance of economic growth, all scrambled together. Why do these rulers encourage this? Because they can be all things to everybody. They can sail more easily with the winds. They can never be tied down to one particular ideology as, for example, was the case in the Soviet model of socialism. They are more immune to charges of hypocrisy. They govern through a vaudeville of languages. I think it's something really distinctive and it's very poorly understood.

PETER MARES

So you're saying what they'll do is they'll shift position according to the contingency of the time, rather than being bound by an ideological view that acts as a strait jacket. Again, going back to your point about these being potentially durable regimes, they're durable because they're also agile.

JOHN KEANE

Yes, so that Putin who is an egocrat - as Mikhail Gorbachev famously said, he thinks he's god - can speak the language of human rights, he can speak the language of democracy. But he can also speak the language, and does speak the language, of Christian Orthodoxy. He makes references to authors from the 1920s who were Russian fascists. He does all of this in a day's work. It's very puzzling. You could say that one of the effects of this vaudeville politics is that it has a certain gaslighting effect. I mean it becomes very difficult for people who are working, struggling to

make ends meet at various levels in various parts of the country to make sense of this. They tend to turn their backs on it and say, oh they're all bastards, they're all corrupt, and shrug their shoulders and get on with doing what they're doing. So it's a technique of governing that is based upon confusion and disorientation. The bulk of the population spends quite a lot of time decoding what he's said, but nothing is ever straightforward. The WYSIWYG principle - what you see is what you get - doesn't apply.

PETER MARES

This is Up Close, I'm Peter Mares and I'm in conversation with John Keane, Professor of Politics at the University of Sydney and convenor of the Sydney Democracy Network. We're discussing the rise of despotism. We've been speaking as if there's a dividing line between despotic regimes on the one hand, and democratic, liberal democratic, regimes on the other. But the language of vaudeville and the politics of vaudeville that you're describing, the ability to reference a range of different ideologies that may be conflicting as if they're not, appears to me to be also a characteristic of President Trump's rule in the United States. So is there such a divide really between these two things, the despotic regime and the democratic one?

JOHN KEANE

Peter, you've just sprung the trap, you've exposed the plot. Because I think that in my concerns with these new despotisms, what I mean is that just as Tocqueville in the middle of the nineteenth century?

PETER MARES

Tocqueville, of course, was a French aristocrat who travelled to the United States?

JOHN KEANE

And wrote one of the classic works in the history of democracy, a two-volume *Démocratie en Amérique*. Pointed out that one of the great dangers confronting the emerging democracies of the nineteenth century would be a new kind of despotism where people, particularly the middle classes, would lose an interest in civic affairs and whose lives were generally improving and would be willing to submit themselves to a regime of power where they were turned into subjects rather than citizens. My idea is that these despotisms are, in a way, simulacra. I mean they're a kind of mirroring of actually-existing democracies. When you include factors we haven't talked about, for instance that all of these despotisms are plutocracies?

PETER MARES

By which you mean?

JOHN KEANE

Great concentrations of wealth at the top and all of them have middle classes of various sizes - a big one in China, between 200 and 300 million people think of themselves as middle class - and then lower strata of the population who are entangled in the patron-client relations that I spoke about. But all of these are plutocracies. But of course that is what is happening in actually-existing

democracies, say of the Atlantic region.

PETER MARES

Because we've seen the transfer of wealth to the top 10, top one percent.

JOHN KEANE

It's been going on for 40 years and it's not sustainable. So the thought that I have with this - you know, why should we revive this old category of despotism - is that we can better analyse I think these competitor regimes. But in doing so, it highlights the way that these despotisms have qualities that are reflected in actually-existing democracies which we value.

PETER MARES

Or, indeed, present in them and operating in them as well.

JOHN KEANE

Well, it's a big question as to the entanglement of these despotisms with actually-existing democracies. The Russian interference in the presidential elections in the United States is a case in point. Actually-existing democracies are doing business deals with these despotisms, they sell military hardware to them and so on.

PETER MARES

Chinese donations to Australian political parties are another example, potentially, of this.

JOHN KEANE

Yes. So as I see it, these years of the twenty-first century are a period in which things are not going well in the house of actually-existing democracies. There's a lot of public disaffection in the United States, in Britain, in European Union democracies and elsewhere. There is a loathing, that is gaining ground, of the rich. There is a sense that those who govern do so through dissembling, that they too practise their own vaudeville and so on. I mean all of those qualities potentially put actually-existing democracies on the road to the kinds of despotisms that I am trying to research. If you think that's just science fiction, we're witnessing transitions from power-sharing, constitutional democracies with free and fair elections on the one hand, to despotism in Hungary, it's happening in Poland.

PETER MARES

Turkey?

JOHN KEANE

Turkey is another case in point. We're witnessing an accelerated transition towards a kind of despotism that the world has never seen before. These are despotisms that have democratic qualities. Those who do so, do what they do in the name of the people. They have elections, they have public forums, they cultivate mechanisms.

PETER MARES

So is this trend to despotism an expression of the failure or the failings of democracy, real-existing democracy as you put it, in the sense that there is a widespread view - and you've suggested this already - that democracy is really an elite enterprise. It's about the elites, the establishment managing things on their own behalf, supported by large media interests, culturally embedded. Is what you're saying here that the rise of despotism is, in a way, a reflection of the failings of real-existing democracy, as you put it? I mean we see, for example, a growing disaffection with democracy in states like the UK, in France, in the US, in Australia. Where people say, well, look, this democracy is really just the establishment running things on their own behalf for their own interests, with the support of big media organisations, a particular cultural viewpoint, we're left out. So is despotism really a response to the failings of democracy?

JOHN KEANE

Two things are clear. One is that in the despotisms I've been describing, there are many voices - intellectuals, journalists, leaders - who are crowing about their victories and their stability, their durability, and pointing the finger at democracies that are producing all kinds of dysfunctions and public disaffection with institutions. There is no doubt, for example, that the whole Trump phenomenon is a great gift to the Chinese Communist Party led by Xi Jinping. Because among Chinese people, the surveys show that they would never want to go down that pathway. This is one trend and that's why the rise of these despotisms is feeding off the paralysis and the disaffection within actually-existing democracies. I think as well, there is a dynamic closely related. You are right that populism is borne of this disaffection in actually-existing democracies. The sense of dysfunctionality, the sense that an establishment - *la casta* as they call it in Spain - is running the show and we people are not involved. This is the soil in which populism flourishes. The question, I think that is on the minds and lips of many people globally is where will this all lead?

If we take the case of the United States, it is not so difficult to imagine that if Trump were re-elected, if he carried on tampering with those monitoring institutions that are designed to produce check and balance, to secure power-sharing, constitutional democracy with free and fair elections, you can imagine that the United States, the largest democratic empire and the first ever global empire, in serious trouble currently - financially and in geopolitical terms - you can imagine that he helps transform the United States into a polity that has most of these qualities. A plutocracy in which those who govern - him - do so in the name of the people. A sense that it's okay to have connections at the top, it doesn't matter if your daughter sits in for you at a G20 meeting. Surveillance grows, the militarisation of policing. He could win more than one election. So, it is not I think, fictional to imagine that this populist dynamic, in the name of the people, can accelerate a degradation of actually-existing democracies and push them in the direction of these despotisms.

PETER MARES

Is part of the appeal of despotism, too, the fact that actually it can get things done in a way that democracy can't? I'm thinking of the contemporary challenges we face, particularly let's say climate change. That a despotic regime can push through

changes, necessary changes in the transition of the energy systems for example, in a way that perhaps a democratic country can't because it's paralysed by voter opinion, business interests, etcetera?

JOHN KEANE

It's true that if you look at the Silk Road Belt Road phenomenon, Chinese capacity to build infrastructure is astonishing. Locally, for many years, politicians in Australia have been talking about a high-speed rail link between Melbourne and Sydney. It's a no-brainer, it should happen, it doesn't happen. The Chinese would build this within two years flat. However, this praise of the efficiency and effectiveness of decision making in these despotisms does raise questions about their weakness. What is the Achilles' heel, what is the potential downfall of these regimes? It is, I think, the dangers of the abuse of power. Despite all the trends I've been describing, despotisms are nevertheless systems of top-down power. The great danger, as the Greeks reminded us, is of hubris. That power goes to the heads of those who rule, that it blinds them, that they are tempted to make foolish decisions.

China is very contradictory as an example. Probably - we don't know - but at least 100 nuclear power stations are being built. It's possible, when the historians look back on this period, they will say what a disaster. Because it only takes one or two to malfunction, not properly engineered, not openly, accountably governed as power stations. If they malfunction, millions of people's lives will be affected. That danger of hubris applies to the banking system in China, it certainly applies to military force in Russia. The dangers of blindness, the dangers of hubris are there in these despotisms. It may well be that we need now to consider the devils inside actually-existing democracies and to raise that old question of what's so good about democracy.

You started with Churchill. I think that there's lots to be said about that Churchill comment and the context in which it was made. He was grumpy on that day and he was accusing the newly-elected Labour Government of being fascist, strange. You know we fought a war against Hitler and now you want to introduce legislation to nationalise railways, coal mines and to build an NHS and to socialise education; well this puts us on the road to national socialism. I think that in the twenty-first century, faced by these despotisms, that old question of what's so good about democracy is back. The surprising and depressing point is that most of the justifications for democracy historically no longer are meaningful or have purchase. The ancient Greeks thought that democracy was a good thing because it made Athens militarily powerful.

PETER MARES

Then it got defeated by Sparta.

JOHN KEANE

Exactly. But I do think there is one front-runner argument for why it is that accountability, openness, rule of law, a civil society, a free media is desirable. That is that it is the best weapon we have for preventing hubris. For preventing in practice

the abuse of power, arbitrary power, that in these years of the twenty-first century we know can lead to great damage foisted on peoples and also the biosphere. So democracy becomes the friend of down-to-earth realism. It becomes the enemy of stupidity, of folly, of blindness that we know power breeds as a kind of disease. This means that democracy is not simply free and fair elections, it's something much more; it's nothing less, but something much more. A set of institutions that can restrain arbitrary exercises of power. For me, the great democratic virtue is humility. The humility of those who represent people, the humility of people who feel that there is a great danger with allowing arrogance a long rope, a long leash.

PETER MARES

So we've described the ways in which despotism and democracy can be seen almost as part of a continuum and that contemporary, democratic societies are exhibiting despotic tendencies and, equally, despotic regimes are using democratic techniques.

JOHN KEANE

Yes.

PETER MARES

Where does the dividing line lie for you? Is the key difference the fact that in a true democracy, if you like, power will be dispersed? Is that where the difference lies?

JOHN KEANE

Pluralism, diversity, respect for complexity, yes. I've tried to find a language in which to describe what's been happening in the world of democracy but also to defend it, using the language of monitory democracy; not monetary but monitory. It's an old...

PETER MARES

As in to monitor.

JOHN KEANE

Yes, and that means publicly to scrutinise power wherever it's exercised and to restrain arbitrary power. Those who take decisions, whether in the field of the corporations or in the field of government or in the field of non-governmental bodies, including bodies that cross borders, whenever power is exercised, the ethic of democracy as a norm ought to be at work. This is what I mean by monitory democracy. That it is a form of democracy that is nothing less than free and fair elections, but something much more. I think, as an ideal, it was borne in the 1940s. I think that's no accident because it was the experience of totalitarianism in the '20s and '30s?

PETER MARES

So a response to fascism in Germany and totalitarian and communism in the Soviet Union.

JOHN KEANE

So during that decade, democracy came to be redefined, its spirit, its language, its

institutions changed. For instance, it was in that decade that the principle crystallised that democracies heron should include rule of law. The first two great expressions of that are the Indian and the German constitutions where democracy comes to mean, yes, free and fair elections, but the elected do not have the right to do whatever they want in the name of the majority of the people. These constitutions were against populism, they were against that experience of fascism which had everything to do with democracy.

PETER MARES

And against majoritarianism or?

JOHN KEANE

Yes.

PETER MARES

?what Tocqueville or John Stuart Mill would have called the tyranny of the majority.

JOHN KEANE

Yes.

PETER MARES

So the principle here that you're going to get some core human rights established, a constitutional bill of rights or something like that.

JOHN KEANE

Yes, and since the 1940s several hundred institutional devices for restraining arbitrary power have been invented that never existed before in the history of democracy. An example is if you look in the field of our relationship with the environment. We've seen the birth, in this generation in actually-existing democracies, of not just green parties but of bioregional assemblies, of mechanisms that warn and try to do something about the exercise by humans of arbitrary power on the biomes in which they dwell and upon which they depend. Something like a democratisation of our relationship with so-called nature is happening. I don't know whether it will succeed, but it is an example of monitory democracy in action. This would have been very puzzling to John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville, never mind Thomas Paine, never mind Montesquieu. They would not have understood things that are going on. This is the positive dimension it seems of democracy.

So the bottom line is that the real test of legitimacy of actually-existing democracies, but also of the despotisms, is do they allow, encourage, build in to the systems of power that govern millions of people's lives, do they build in mechanisms for ensuring that folly and stupidity and hubris doesn't take root? In this sense, actually-existing democracies have a great chance, in these years of the twenty-first century, of renewing, of reimagining, of refreshing democracy in this sense. It's a much bigger project than cleaning up elections and getting rid of dark money, for instance. It is also the great challenge to those despotisms that I've been speaking about. They are simulated democracies. It may be, when all things are considered, that we're passing

through times where that model, that simulated democracy of despotisms, will prevail. That means that the world that our children and grandchildren inherit will be one that will require the rewriting of textbooks. It's a world that is unfamiliar to us. This is a 1920's, 1930's moment, I don't think that we are talking the return of fascism or bolshevism; this is not on the agenda anywhere. I think the great development is the rise of these despotisms and their capacity to actually restructure the world and to dominate the world. If that were to happen, then power-sharing, constitutional, plural democracies will shrink to insignificance. It's a dark thought, but it's worth pondering because, it is, if my reading of these dynamics is plausible, it's a tangible, palpable possibility.

PETER MARES

And a spur to us to reinvigorate democracy in defence of that future.

JOHN KEANE

Yes, and I think that there is no implication here of doing it militarily. Question, how to deal with the spread of Chinese power, the return of China to the global stage after 200 years? The Trump administration view is that they have to be confronted and contained militarily. I think this is not only dangerous, it's unwise, it's extremely risky. Much better would be to work on dynamics that are much closer to home. I'm thinking of dealing with the devils, the demons, that are appearing inside actually-existing democracies; dealing with this mounting problem of rising inequality that's not [sustainable]; dealing with environment issues; dealing with freedoms, expanding freedoms; bolstering institutions, like courts, media, that can secure a plural, power-sharing democracy. This is a priority.

PETER MARES

John Keane, thanks for joining us on Up Close.

JOHN KEANE

It's my pleasure.

PETER MARES

John Keane is Professor of Politics at the University of Sydney and at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin. He's also convenor of the Sydney Democracy Network. His latest book is an account of the rise of China, it's called *When Trees Fall, Monkeys Scatter*. You'll find links to that and to many of his publications and more details about his research on the Up Close website. Up Close is a production of the University of Melbourne, Australia. If you like Up Close, you may want to check out another of our podcasts, *Eavesdrop on Experts*, which features stories of inspiration and insight in conversation with researchers. This episode of Up Close was recorded on 17 July 2017, producer was Eric van Bommel, with audio-engineering by Gavin Nebauer. I'm Peter Mares, thanks for listening and I hope you can join us again soon.

VOICEOVER

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