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From prefect system to Student Representative Councils via Representative Councils of Learners in South African schools: Which representative government is considered the best?

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Abstract

In the history of South Africa there have been three conflicting traditions to represent learners in school governance structures: rule by prefects; rule by Student Representative Councils (SRCs); and rule by Representative Councils of Learners (RCLs). I use Pitkin's (1967) views on representation and Aristotle's (ca.350 BCE/1943) ideal types of government to map out a conceptual geography of learner governments in South African schools. The problem is that the national Department of Education (1999) policy Guides for Representative Councils of Learners set the outer limits of what counts as representation for the benefit of all learners in South African schools. I assert that a prototype *polity*, which means rule or government by citizen as a fusion of RCLs and SRCs that lean towards SRCs is the best form of government for schools in South Africa. In the end, I advocate for a prototypical polity-government that expresses and secures the good of every learner as a viable government in post-apartheid South African schools.

Keywords: political representation, prefect system, Student Representative Councils, Representative Councils of Learners, polity, South Africa, schools

Introduction

Authorization: "the giving of authority to someone to act" (Pitkin, 1967, p. 38). Symbolic: "representation is primarily a frame of mind" (p. 104). Substantive: "people really do act through their government and are not merely passive recipients of its actions" (p. 232). Accountability: "holding someone to account for their actions" (p. 55). Descriptive: "standing for something (or someone) absent by some correspondence or features" (p. 80).

> Democrats take Equality for their motto; oligarchs believe that political rights should be unequal. On Monarchy there [is] absolute Kingship. Of Aristocracy . . . the best men alone are citizens. Polity is a compromise between Democracy and Oligarchy, but inclines to the Democratic side. Tyranny is . . . the barbarian despotism … the elective dictatorship … the lawless rule of one man over unwilling subjects. (Aristotle, ca.350 BCE/1943, pp. 37–39)

As a point of departure, I have categorised Pitkin's (1967) notions of representation and Aristotle's (ca.350 BCE/1943) types of government and prefects, Student Representative Councils, and Representative Councils of Learners in three phases: a) prefectorial descriptive-aristocrats, authoritarian-tyrants and symbolic-monarchs; b) substantive-democratic SRCs; and c) accountable-oligarchs RCLs. What is the rationale for undertaking this conceptual geography in South Africa today, one may ask. The answer is simple. Unlike prefects, SRCs, and RCLs governments, Aristotle's prototype polity-government is both feasible and desirable because learners are governed and at the same time free in their own government. Thus, I found myself thinking deeply about the idea of representation that is related to the idea of politics, that is, the character, behaviour, and actions of the prefects, SRCs, and RCLs in school governance on the one hand, and Clark-Kazak (2023) who "highlights ethical dilemmas related to representation (p. 58) . . . [and] questions of representivity, especially in relation to intersecting positionalities" (p. 63) on the other. It is not surprising that political scientists had "long theorised about representation and factors affecting how elected officials represent their constituents" (Dynes et al., 2023, p. 1792). With that said, I

- show that the prefect system trained both colonial British and apartheid South African boys and girls to pass as Aristotle's aristocrats, tyrants, and monarchs in schools;
- review the school Soweto Student Representative Councils and SRCs' struggle against colonial-apartheid prefects and the ushering in of Aristotle's oligarchs' RCLs in post-apartheid South African schools;
- anxiously express concerns with the present national policy Guides for RCLs' compromise between the prefects' rule by a selected few and SRCs' rule by the many in South African schools; and
- advocate for the rule by Aristotle's prototype polities that promote virtuous rulers in pursuit of the common good of every learner in post-apartheid South African schools.

Methodology

Imenda (2014, p. 189) defined a conceptual framework "as an end result of bringing together a number of related concepts to explain a given event or give a broader understanding of the phenomenon of interest or simply, of a research problem." I maintain that all research is partly conceptual, empirical, and philosophical. In simple words, all research strives for conceptual clarity, contains a review of literature, and locates empirical research within the preferred conceptual frame. As a conceptual piece, this article proceeds only on a theoretical level characterised by the conceptual meaning, clarifies the problem, and presents possible

alternatives. Thus, it employs three methods of inquiry. On the descriptive side, I set up a conceptual framework and trace political representation in colonial British and apartheid South African schools. On the analytical side, I offer a critical analysis of a representative democracy framework that revives the prefect system and weakens the SRC tradition in post-apartheid South African schools. Last, from a normative perspective, I find the rule by polities in schools viable, especially in South Africa's Constitutional democratic set-up, which is second best to polity, by the way.

The British boy-government[1] in colonial-apartheid South African schools

In her seminal book, *The concept of representation* (1967), Pitkin's descriptive theorists define representation as standing for others. As Pitkin demonstrates,

> True representation . . . requires that the legislature be selected that its composition corresponds accurately to that of the whole nation; only then is it really a representative body (1967, p. 60) . . . the legislature [is] a "mirror" of the nation . . . it "mirrors" the people, the state of public consciousness. . .. Representation depends on the representative's characteristics, on what he *is* or is *like*, on being something rather than doing something (p.61) . . . And when human beings represent in this sense, what matters is not their actions but what they are or are like. (pp. 80–81)

From a descriptive theorist's perspective, being of Christian character was a permit to power for prefects in Victorian and Edwardian England between 1837 and 1910. First, the word prefect (Latin, *praefectus*) refers to a high-ranking military or civil official in Victorian public schools. Second, the word aristocracy (Greek, rule by the best) points to "the Arnoldian[2] ideal—the Christian gentlemen . . . the concept of character wedded middle-class morality to gentry-class style . . . the Victorian public schoolboy learned early to leaven moral earnestness with gentility, a manner of causal assurance and leisurely grace" (Wilkinson, 1964, p. 10). (This is typical of Pitkin's descriptive form of legislative bodies.) Third, at Rugby, as moral organisers, aristocratic prefects "were expected to emulate the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant gentlemen: the versatile, clean-cut, well-mannered, prudent man of affairs . . . respected, and influential—a pillar of society" (Randall, 1982, p. 2), so boy-government became a vehicle to train Christian school leaders. Fourth, aristocratic prefects "ran house activities and helped legislate rules; they kept order, judged offences and often did the punishment themselves. . . They were, in short, an administration, a judiciary, and part of the legislature rolled into one" (Wilkinson, 1964, p. 30), so a clear link was established between schoolboy-governors and British national governors. Last, aristocratic prefects reinforced existing patterns of the self-interested pursuit of the ruling class in mission schools and the

1 This is the term used by Randall (1982) to refer to the prefect system (or rule by prefects)—a phenomenon inherited from the British public school tradition. In this article, I adhere to this usage on the understanding that one could also employ the term girl-government to refer to girl prefects both in British and South African public-private schools. I use the terms boy-government and prefects interchangeably.

2 Thomas Arnold, Rugby School's famous headmaster from 1827 to 1842, is frequently credited with having perfected the aristocratic prefect system.

broader South African society in treating the so-called commoners under their rule like "a flock of sheep innocently nibbling the grass side by side", to use Mill's (1975, p. 345) expression. In an anonymous letter to the authorities of Healdtown in the 1950s, school students complained, "Our representatives are not taking our complaints to you . . . students have no say in your aristocratic form of government . . . what is the use of these prefects as being our reps, they should be called your tools" (Hyslop, 1999, p. 15).

For Pitkin, authorisation theorists believe that political representation is about acting with authority. Viewed this way,

> a representative is someone who has been authorized to act. This means that he has been *given* a right to act which he did not have before, while the represented has become responsible for the consequences of that action as if he has done it himself. It is a view strongly skewed in *favor* of the representative. His rights have been enlarged and his responsibilities have been (if anything) decreased. The authorization view concentrates on the *formalities* of a relationship between a representative and the represented. Representation is a kind of "black box" shaped by the initial giving of authority, within which the representative can do whatever he *pleases.* (Pitkin, 1967, pp. 38–39 emphases in original).

If we look more closely at Pitkin's authoritative view, we can see that it resembles authoritarianism in colonial British and apartheid South African schools. Consider the following: a "prefect was a senior pupil, elected by the teachers [or principals] and authorised to maintain discipline in the school" (Hosiosky, 1978, p. 2). At Bishops school in Cape Town, a head prefect of the late 1870s described the way in which juniors were abused by senior prefectorial tyrants, who "ordered fags[3] to sing, and if they failed would thrash them" (Randall, 1982, p. 64), this violent conduct is associated with absolute rule (tyrant). This prefectorial abuse of authority has the hallmarks of Aristotle's tyrants' elected dictators. In the mid-19th century, prefectorial tyranny achieved notoriety, and was often associated with cruelty, bullying, physical punishment, and flogging power signifying tyrants' as barbaric despots. In Mack's (1938, p. 214) eyes, older prefect tyrants "who freely broke the spirit of the younger or produced in them revenge and deceit did not diminish tyranny—they authorize and multipl[y] it." For all intents and purposes, the school management "s[aw] the class leaders as part of the management structure to install control . . . restore law and order in crisis situations" (Eke, 2022, p. 257). On the contrary, however, the perfect system was "nothing but 'senseless tyranny'[and] 'abject slavery', [was] 'most barbarous', [held] 'arbitrary power' [and was a] 'world of anarchy and lawless violence'" (Mack, 1938, pp. 157–216) and a sign of tyrants' lawless rule. Little wonder that prefectorial tyranny "was exercised by fools of a larger size over poor creatures of a less, and produced cruelty and 'abject, pining submission,'" Mack (1938, p. 157) bemoaned.

3 In Mack's (1938) opinion, in the 18th century and for a long time afterwards, a colonial-apartheid prefect "was virtually unimpeded in the exercise of his right to extract services from certain subordinates, called fags, who ran his errands, made his bed, blacked his boots, and performed other menial tasks for him" (p. 41).

According to Pitkin, symbolic theorists see representation as acting on behalf of others. As Pitkin declared,

> When we speak of a symbol (any symbol) as "representing," we are assimilating it to a conventional symbol, to the kind of symbol that can *only* represent. . . . The essentially static "standing for" kind of application of symbolic representation to political life emerges most clearly in regard to the head of state in his symbolic, ceremonial functions. . .. For the author, representation is a condition characterized by the represented being satisfied, "primarily a frame of mind" . . . it seems rather to involve working on the minds of those who are to be represented or who are to be the audience accepting the symbolization. (1967, pp. 97–111).

There are five points worth noting about Pitkin's symbolic view. First, the word monarchy means hereditary rule by kings or queens. Second, the kinship or queenship is identical to the prefectorial monarchs who drew out benefits from fags treating them as male-servants and serving maids of boy-governors by "send[ing] them into the village to buy them liquor and tobacco" (Randall, 1982, p. 64) or, in other words, Aristotle's royalty in schools. Second, this symbolism is also evident in the prefect-fagging system that made the represented see life in terms of royalty and servants—Aristotle's kings and queens in schools. Third, Blumberg's study points to the symbolic monarchy's miscellaneous duties that ranged from "reading prayers at assembly, supervising 'detention' classes, taking assembly once a week, taking roll-call before assemblies, taking roll-call at sports functions and organizing fund-raising schemes for charities" (1963, p. 44) or Pitkin's symbolic royal duties. Fourth, Hyslop (1999, p. 15) has detailed the privileges prefects "enjoyed, such as special common-room, tea during the intervals, tea with the teaching staff during the breaks, exemption from uniform inspection, exemption from detention assemblies, being able to go out to movies, dances and concerts" that recall Aristotle's and Pitkin's classism. Last, a variety of distinctive insignia distinguished prefectorial monarchy from their subjects, like, for example, "distinctive blazers, special ties, distinctive cloth or metal badges, distinctive hatbands, and distinctive girdles in the case of girl prefects" (Blumberg, 1963, p. 48); prefects gained god-like status. All in all, references to aristocrats, tyrants, and kings or queens, tools, and notoriety point to two sorts of conflict that engulfed the British boy-government in colonial-apartheid South African schools. These are conflicting forms and types of prefectship, on the one hand, conflict between prefects and, on the other, the learner population, teachers, and principals. It was the democratic SRCs' rejection of prefectship and its struggle for democratic representation that gave birth to RCLs in post-apartheid South Africa to which I now turn my attention.

Student-government[4] and learner-government[5] in post-apartheid South Africa

In stark contrast to prefectorial aristocrats, authoritarian tyrants and symbolic monarchs—all forms of representative governments—Pitkin (1967) developed the idea of substantive acting for others.

> Perhaps when we call a governmental body or system representative, we are saying something broader and more general about the way in which it operates as an institutionalised arrangement . . . as embodied in a whole political system. Political representation is primarily a public, institutionalised arrangement involving many people and groups, and operating in the complex ways of large-scale social arrangements. What makes it representation is not any single action by any one participant, but the over-all structure and functioning of the system, the patterns emerging from the multiple activities of many people. (pp. 221–222)

Pitkin's substantive representation is reminiscent of the SSRCs' rejection of the British prefect system and its struggle for equality in apartheid South Africa. The name Student Representative Council, "adopted by South African Student Movement (SASM) high school students in 1968, was inspired by South African university SRCs which originated in the early 1900s" (Shay, 2023, p. 41). Subsequently, high school SRCs were first established at Diepkloof Secondary School and then spread across Soweto during the 1970s (Shay, 2023). At the top of the SSRCs' agenda was the "rejection of 'puppet' national government representation and an ineffective Prefect system" (p. 49). As a democracy, SSRCs were "considered intersectionally, reflecting the multiple structures" (Siow, 2023, p. 533) across Soweto high schools and this became a broad and general operation. As a point of practical amplification, the SSRCs' definition of participation was to give proper responsibility to students for, and control over, their lives compared to Aristotle's aristocrats, tyrants, and monarchs who were submissive, obedient, and loyal to school authority structures in colonial British and apartheid South Africa. As Kane-Berman (2001, p. 109) noted, "the SSRC was apparently an autonomous body, making its own decisions." In the words of Shay (2023, p. 55), "post-June 16th the SSRCs campaign[ed] against the police on school campuses, the release of detainees, brainstorm[ed] safe houses for students on the run." Up to that point, 'student governments' were seen by many as "true and genuine student representative structures . . . for the expression of student grievances" (Davenport, 1991, p. 422).

Under apartheid education, SRCs were unofficial learner-governments established "in some (mainly 'black', but also 'Indian' and 'coloured') schools"[6] (Hunt, 2014, p. 269) to abolish

4 The concept of student had a political tag attached to it during apartheid South Africa. In the opinion of Hyslop (1988), the Soweto Student Representative Council (SSRC), formed in 1976, promoted the idea of democratic student representation as a way of forming student-government alongside the official prefect system and dummy Student Representative Councils. The term student-government is used synonymously with Student Representative Councils in this article.

5 In a democratic South African education system, the concept of learner has an educational tone synonymous with schooling, not school student politics. Although I use both concepts, i.e. student and learner interchangeably, they must be understood in their political-historical contexts. I also employ the phrase learner-government to refer to Representative Councils of Learners.

6 Hunt (2014) used this disaggregation term to describe the full and differential impact of colonial-apartheid education policies on the various oppressed groups in South Africa.

the prefect system in South Africa. In the longer term, SRCs emphasised the educative potential of learner participation in school governance in challenging authoritarian, senseless tyranny and symbolic rulers. The SRCs' activism was reflected in the Congress of South African Students'motto "Yes to SRC, No to Prefects" and from parents, teachers, students, community leaders, religious bodies, and workers who also rejected the prefect system in schools—evidence of so-called student-government as a public participatory institution.[7] The SRCs' political and educational strategy encouraged "debates, discussions, plays, poetry readings, films and songs . . . [p]rescribed textbooks were critically dissected; the daily press was read politically" (Bundy, 1987, p. 320) and this was an expression of student-government as a large-scale political community. The connection between the struggle for democratic representation and the struggle for national liberation was well captured by Shay (2023, p. 50) who declared that "whilst the Prefect system continued to entrench grander Apartheid state authoritarian values such as loyalty, obedience and fear in its youngest subjects, the purpose of SRCs emerged as opposite to this." The SRCs' education struggle and political struggle were not incompatible but were, rather, intimately and reciprocally linked. Even though the National Party government did "everything it could to frustrate and crush the establishment of democratic SRCs" (Sisulu, 1987, p. 25), the struggle for the recognition of legitimate SRCs continued until the South African Schools Act (1996) paved the way for the RCLs in 1999.

For accountability theorists, representation is holding someone to account for their actions. As Pitkin put it,

> Accountability theorist . . . equates elections with a holding-to-account: an elected official is a representative because (and insofar as) he will be subject to reelection or removal at the end of his term. Accountability to the governed is what defines representation, whether it be achieved by elections or by other means. Accountability theorists introduced accountability as a response and a corrective to the authorization view. The accountability theorists are usually engaged in trying to distinguish "true" or "genuine" or "real" representation from something that has only the outward trappings, that looks like representation in a normal way but is not. One is held responsible in order that he may become responsible, that is, responsive to the needs and claims of others, to the obligations implicit in his position. (1967, pp. 56–57)

From Pitkin's accountability view, the Guides defined RCLs as

> [t]he most prestigious official structure of learners in the entire school … made up of learners elected by their fellow learners to represent them. . . the only body that

7 The Congress of South African Students (COSAS) (formed in 1979) had its origins in the Freedom Charter tradition. On the educational front, the COSAS programme of action sought to achieve dynamic, free, and democratic education for all South African learners. They put forward a number of demands including "the recognition of SRCs; the cessation of corporal punishment and the scrapping of the Bantu Education" [Act of 1953] (Molobi, 1988, p. 156). With the establishment of the Department of Bantu Education in 1958, schools still in the Bantu Education system set up their own democratic SRC as an alternative to the prefect system. In some schools, SRCs successfully replaced prefects but in other schools both traditions co-existed and attempts to establish SRC structures in conservative schools were met with fierce resistance by school authorities.

> represents every learner and in which every learner can participate. (Department of Education, 1999, p. 11)

The words "official," "prestigious" and "elected" point to the Guides that reflect prefectorial aristocrats (rule by the best) and monarchs (rule by a single person) who gave way to RCLs' oligarchs (rule by a few) in schools. At the same time, the RCLs' oligarchs stand on the opposite side of prefectorial tyranny—to me this is a reaction and a restorative to absolute rule. Additionally, the Guides state,

> [W]e have found that learners quickly realise the significance of their role in an RCL once they understand the connections between the struggle for democracy in the past, and the present need to consolidate and broaden democracy as we strive to build our nation. (Department of Education, 1999, p. 11)

A clear distinction is made between real representation, that is, reinforcing and widening democracy from the unreal representation of the SSRCs' and the SRCs' struggle for democracy. At the same time, the South African Schools Act (1996) stipulates that "[a] representative council of learners is the only recognised and legitimate representative learner body at the school" (Department of Education, 1996, p. 10). The notions of being recognised and legitimate give credence to rule by RCLs that, designed for a new democratic order, arose from the ashes of the anti-apartheid and democratic SRCs. This was commendable modesty, no doubt, but the Guides for RCLs undermined the struggle for democratic SRCs and regressed to features of the prefect system. This ambivalence in the Guides became a bone of contention between the democrats and oligarchs during the interregnum, a negotiation period in South Africa. Regrettably, the rule by SRCs "has proven in theory and practice to be an illusion … a continuing tension between ideal and achievement" (Mnisi & Mathebula, 2024, p. 319). Seen through Msweli's eyes, "[I]gnoring student voices leads to unaccountability, the disempowerment of students, and authoritarian leadership in schools" (2021, p. 55).

I now turn to the Guides' rekindling of boy-government and the dilution of student-government in post-apartheid South African schools.

The Guides for Representative Councils of Learners' architecture in post-apartheid South Africa: A critical analytical view

The Guides' official RCLs oscillate between the prefect system and SRCs. For the Guides,

> Many schools have a tradition of Student Representative Councils which played a major role in the birth of the new South Africa. Other schools have a long school prefect tradition. ... All these traditions needed to be brought together within the new context of consolidating democracy at school level. The best elements of these traditions had to be considered in order to see what was appropriate. In practice we

> have found that learners quickly realise the significance of their role in an RCL once they understand the connections between the struggle for democracy in the past, and the present need to consolidate and broaden democracy as we strive to build our nation. (Department of Education, 1999, p. 11)

The Guides' accountable-oligarchs third way is revealing in many ways. Significantly, political negotiators on education acknowledged the long-standing official prefect system and unofficial SRC traditions in South Africa.[8] Questionably, in their attempt to consolidate democracy in schools, the Guides merge the prefect system and SRCs into RCLs in post-apartheid South Africa. My disquiet with the Guides' 'merger is four-fold. First, its narrative of return suffers from a conceptual disorder because it does not define best elements of the prefect system, on the one hand and democratic SRCs, on the other, so its vision is blurry, non-contextual, and unhelpful. Second, it seeks to mask boy-government as a tool of colonial British and apartheid South African school authorities and this, to me, is damaging, parochial, and absurd. Third, there is lurking vagueness, ambiguity, and complexity at play here. As I mentioned in the introduction, Pitkin's (1967) and Aristotle's (ca.350 BCE/1943) representative governments straddle three different epochs, so, are the Guides converting complex traditions into simple formulae? Fourth, the Guides for RCLs can be "described as a 'compromise solution' which attempted to acknowledge and address South Africa's diverse schooling histories" (Naidoo, 2005, cited in Hunt, 2014, p. 269) so the current learner-government seems to be marching forward and looking backwards at the same time. Tellingly, Shay (2023, p. 122) concluded that "[i]ntense bargaining, trade-offs and political betrayal came to characterize the policy-making process of the South African Schools Act." But, as Lundy (2007, p. 931) suggested, one of the inherent difficulties with this is that the Guides' "good-will can dissipate when the rhetoric needs to be put into practice."

I liken the Guides' third way to Hegel's (1977) dialectical method, best understood in terms of the argument that begins with a thesis (the minds) and its antithesis (the result of the encounter between minds), which together produce a synthesis (the resolution between the two competing minds). To illustrate this method,

> In grasping the thought that the *single* individual consciousness is *in itself* Absolute Essence, consciousness has returned into itself. For the Unhappy Consciousness the in-self is the beyond of itself (Hegel, 1977, p. 139). They . . . engage in this struggle, for they must raise their certainty of being for themselves to truth, both in the case of the other and in their own case (p. 114). The middle term is the unity directly aware of both and connecting them, and is the consciousness of their unity, which it proclaims to consciousness and thereby to itself (p. 139). But now this category or *simple* unity of self-consciousness and being possesses difference *in itself*; for its essence is just

8 Following the unbanning of anti-apartheid political formations in 1990, the formal political negotiation settlement was significant in limiting the democratic power of the anti-apartheid movement and producing an elite pact around the emerging policy framework. The political negotiations on education were vitally important in bringing about a compromise that receded from the model of democracy developed in the anti-apartheid movement, with roots in the Freedom Charter tradition.

> this, to be immediately one and selfsame otherness, or in absolute difference (p. 142, emphases in original).

Hegel's dialectical method is what the political-education negotiators had in mind when the Guides for RCLs were developed. In Hegel's dialectical, the prefects and the SRCs' traditions in the Guides represent a struggle for recognition—the RCL is the resolution of the two warring types of government. In the context of this article, Hegel's dialectic method can best be interpreted this way: the colonial-apartheid prefect system (prefect mind) was rejected by the democratic SRCs (the struggle between the prefect and SRC minds); the resolution to this prefect and SRC struggle is the Guides for RCLs (RCL minds). In the agreement, prefects remain absolute, marked from the SRCs. At the same time, the prefectship is twinned with democratic SRCs. In the final analysis, the prefect system is both marked from the SRCs and similar to it—identity in difference, as Hegel asserts. Three traps should be avoided when it comes to the Guides' Hegelian resolution of the impasse in South Africa schools today. First, the unity of the prefects and SRCs suggests that there is only one authentic set of characteristics, behaviours, and actions that government rulers displayed over time. As seen earlier in this article, political identities were the creation of colonial-apartheid power structures, on the one hand, and anti-apartheid authorities, inside-and-outside schools, on the other. Second, those that the prefects, SRCs and RCLs rulers represent are not a solidified, undifferentiated, and homogenous mass. After all, prefectorial aristocrats' commoners, tyrants' oppressed, monarchs' servants, democratic equals, and oligarchs' unequals are individual human beings too. Third, the Guides' blind acceptance of historically inherited traditions escapes critical scrutiny and constructive criticism since they suffer from presentism. It is quite clear to me that in the context of the Guides' oligarchs' third way, the life and death struggle of prefectships and SRCs can be resolved only if the former gives in to the latter—democracy must not be made a slave to aristocracy, tyranny, and monarchy in schools.

As far as can be judged, the Guides' oligarchs' view, their prefectorial language and their supposedly democratic architecture peddle an agenda atypical of those it seeks to educate in post-apartheid South Africa. Although she is not writing about Hegelian political-education negotiators in South Africa, Rand states the following about reasoning as a virtue or lack of it:

> Reason is the faculty that identifies and integrates the material provided by man's senses. It is a faculty that man has to exercise by *choice*. Thinking is not an automatic function. In any hour and issue of his life, man is free to think or evade that effort. Thinking requires a state of full focused awareness. Man can focus his mind to a full, active, purposefully directed awareness of reality—or he can unfocus it and let himself drift in a semiconscious daze, merely reacting to any chance stimulus of the immediate moment, at the mercy of his undirected sensory-perceptual mechanism and of any random, associational connections it might happen to make. (1964, p. 22, emphasis in original)

Rand's idea of objectivism shows vividly how the Guides' reasons to rekindle prefectship and dilute the SRCs' traditions go: 1) Political representation is linked essentially with the prefect system (officialdom) and not with the SRCs (non-official); 2) Any reasoning that is not directly linked with the prefectship fails to be linked essentially with the supposedly official prefect system but with non-official SRCs; 3) Therefore, political representation must be linked essentially and directly with the prefectship (official rulers) not the SRCs (democratic rulers); if it is not, it does not count as political representation in post-apartheid South African schools. Given this asymmetry, we ended up with a negotiated resolution that gave way to a fusion of choice in South Africa. To put it bluntly, the price that we paid and are still paying for evading free thought was the co-existence of SRCs and Prefects: "the choice to allow the prefect system to continue as a parallel structure. A prefect system is inherently undemocratic . . . an anachronism in the new system . . . [that] cause[d] confusion…possible conflict and competition. …Some use[d] [it] to undermine and ignore" the SRCs (South African Democratic Teachers Union, 1996, p. 4) warned us. To heighten the contrast, Hunt's empirical study on learner councils in four schools in South Africa concluded that "School A had a two-tier RCL system. . . . In schools B, C and D, a prefect body remained" (2014, pp. 274 –81). As in the past,

> the prefect system was seen as supportive of staff and school discipline, whereas … councils were potentially 'contesting authority', being independent and 'antagonistic' [in] School D . . . [there was] reluctance from staff to support RCLs and the continued perceived importance of prefect bodies. (Hunt, 2014, p. 181)

The Guides' rekindling of the prefect system and the dilution of the SRCs tradition point to the present-day representative democratic foundation and was fraught with tension between the State's authority of its own reasoning, on the one hand, and practical reason on the other, in South African schools. Not surprisingly, the Guides' oligarchs' third way brought to sharp focus school political representation as an arena of conflict and struggle that had undergone a transition from colonialism via apartheid to democracy in South Africa.

School polities in post-apartheid South African schools: Dancing with Aristotle

In *Nicomachean ethics* (ca.350 BCE/2000), Aristotle defined virtue as a trait of character that is demonstrated in repeated actions:

> Virtue . . . is of two kinds: that of the intellect and that of a character. . . . The state that makes human being good and makes him perform his characteristics activity well. Virtue, then, is a state involving rational choice—the reason, that is, by reference to which the practically wise person would determine it. (pp. 23–31)

For Aristotle, virtue is choice "lying in a mean" or, in other words, the intermediate position between two extremes. The virtuous ruler is one who finds the correct balance between these extremes. For Aristotle's prototype polity-government, virtue is not simply about rights

actions such as standing for others (prefectorial descriptive-aristocrats), acting with authority (prefectorial authoritarian-tyrants), acting on behalf of others (prefectorial symbolic-monarchs), acting for others (substantive-democratic SRCs) and acting before being held to account (accountable-oligarchs' RCLs). It also involves the development of character to do what is right by: 1) taking a stand against aristocrats who shape others into conformity, obedience, and loyalty; 2) acting with authority in the face of a tyrant's pursuit of power; 3) acting on behalf of those servants who slave under the yoke of kingship; 4) acting against the democrats that ignore the law; and 5) holding the oligarchs and their thirst for wealth to account for their actions. To elaborate, Rand's (virtue as reason) and Aristotle's (virtue as choice) implore our virtuous learner governors to choose reasonably the appropriate moral virtue (excellence of character) in South African schools; is this not the whole point of educating citizens to question, to reason, and to choose the best form of government? Relatedly, here I quote Lawhead (2019, p. 89), "[B]eing moral involves knowing what is good and choosing it for its own sake." If this line of argument is accepted, virtuous learner rulers will be neither exclusively prefectorial aristocrats, nor exclusively prefectorial tyrants and neither exclusively prefectorial monarchs, nor exclusively RCL democrats, nor RCL oligarchs. They will be drawn from a pool of virtuous citizens, neither prefectorial enough to be indifferent to the SRCs, nor democratic enough to be indifferent to the RCLs in post-apartheid South African schools.

For Aristotle (ca. 350 BCE/1943), a *polis* (or classical Greek city-state) existed to reveal and safeguard the good of its citizens. In Aristotle's *polis*-life, virtuous rulers lead and direct *polities* to live a good life.

> All must have the virtue of the good citizen—thus, and thus only, can the state be perfect. . . . The good citizen . . . should know how to govern like a freeman, and how to obey like a freeman—these are the virtues of a citizen. Although the temperance and justice of a ruler are distinct from those of a subject, the virtue of a good man will include both; for the virtue of the good man who is free and also a subject, e.g. his justice, will not be one but will comprise distinct kinds, the one qualifying him to rule, the other to obey, and differing as the temperance and courage of men and women differ. (pp. 131–134)

There are three key points to note about Aristotle's virtuous citizens in *polises.* First, Aristotle sees a *polis* both as an "artificial creation of human beings, a human invention, and as something that is 'natural' to human beings" (Oakeshott, 2006, p. 105). Second, *polis*-life is free life; this means that every learner is free by virtue of being a citizen in a *polis*. Third, every citizen belongs to two worlds—the world of 'nature', the private world in which the relationships are biological, and activity is governed by natural necessity . . . and he belongs to the public world … and it is this second life which offers him the opportunity to be 'free'" (Oakeshott, 2006, p. 93). What are the educational implications of Aristotle's *polis* and *polis*-life in South Africa today? In my view, there is no contrast between learners being governed and learners being free in Aristotle's prototype school since polity-government—the public and personal dimensions of citizenship—are counterparts of each other in schools. It is, I

believe, fair to observe that Aristotle's prototype polity-government reflects two key virtues needed by all *polities* in schools and these are reason and choice——learners are rational beings able to choose and lead a good life. As observed from above, Aristotle's rule by *polities* is to be judged by its effects on learners, whether they can transcend their subjective personal authority and self-infatuated perspectives and take the public good into account in schools. To drive home this point, "there can be no liberty without virtue, no virtue without citizens; create citizens, and you have everything you need; without them you have nothing but debased slaves, from the rulers of the State downwards" (Rousseau, 1996, p. 147). And, hence, I maintain that political representation must be tied to a prototypical polity-government that develops active characters by making choices in pursuit of the human good—not the prefect (or rule by the best, absolute rulers, rule by kings or queens), or SRCs (rule of the many) or RCLs (rule by a few).

As indicated in the Introduction, Aristotle's (ca.350 BCE/1943) prototype polity is a compromise between democracy and oligarchy but leans towards the democrats. Of good Constitutions there are three: Monarchy, Aristocracy, and Polity. Of bad there are also three: Tyranny, Oligarchy, and Extreme Democracy. The bad are perversions of the good (, pp. 36-37). Both Democracy and Oligarchy contain inherent flaws which lead to revolution, but Democracy is the more stable of the two types (p. 41) . . . but there is another rule of another kind, which is exercised over freemen and equals by birth—a constitutional rule (p. 133). In a well attempered polity, there should appear to be both elements and yet neither (p. 188).

Aristotle's strict adherence to the dichotomy between good and bad governments is useful but not helpful nor applicable in the South African context. As a notable example, Section 1 paints colonial British and apartheid South Africa prefectorial aristocracy and monarchy as a picture of bad governments, not good ones. I contend, quite plausibly, that having been developed in the struggle against colonial-apartheid prefect system, democratic SRCs were considered good forms of government. Paradoxically, but crucially, oligarchical RCLs are bad forms of government. I agree with Aristotle. Amid these diverse but related types of government lies a prototypical polity-government—a fusion between oligarchical RCLs and democratic SRCs inclined towards the SRCs—so democrats are *polities*. The major difference between the Guides' compromise and the prototype polity fusion can be summarised in this way: the Guides rekindled the prefect system, diluted the SRCs, and recognised the RCLs as the unity of the other two and, next to the RCLs and SRCs, the prototype polity-government arose. Now, in this mixed government, the tendency to run to the RCLs, on the one hand, and SRCs on the other, is ruled out. Thus, the prefect and RCLs become bad governors, the SRCs good governors, and prototypical polity-governors the best. Put simply, in a prototypical polity-government political power is in the hands of virtuous rulers guided by free thinking, rational choices, and practical wisdom. These are philosophical prophets who understand the meaning of leading a good life in schools. Let me argue one small, but significant, point. Living virtuously is the ultimate end, both of individual and of states but, sadly, the Guides for RCLs unknowingly refuse the rule of virtuous boys, students, or learners in post-apartheid South African schools.

Conclusion

The end point of my conceptual geography identifies the starting point from which the dialectic relationship between the prefect system, and democratic SRCs that lead to competitive RCLs ought to be understood. The Guides' third way is a feel-good, cosmetic response to our inherent political representative traditions—too quick, too neat, too easy a compromised solution. It is used as a rule book for a political future that seeks to change our complicated school political representation into a straightforward blueprint in South African schools. This begs the question: are national political educators ready to plunge in, that is, acknowledge and accept blind spots on their part, embrace this cruel gesture wholeheartedly, and think anew and see through the 'polity-government' binoculars in schools? Disrupting the dichotomy between RCLs and SRCs is compelling and urgent—this union is necessary since it is perennial. When national democrats submit to being ruled by a Constitutional government, RCLs and SRCs become *polities*. This rule by *polities* is not an insurmountable one; we just must "ask that it do[es] so and direct our [political analytical tools] towards this end" as hooks (1994, p. 60) advised everyone. For this to happen philosophers of education should probe more deeply into these vexed questions. From which perspective did political-education negotiators view, develop, and produce the national policy Guides for RCLs? What constitutes the best elements of the prefect system and SRCs? Is it possible to educate for active, critical, and inquiring minds amid competing prefectship, and the tradition of SRCs, and RCLs in schools? I hope that these policy questions can move us one step closer to face our niggling past, our urgent present, and our uncertain future in the realm of school governance in general in post-apartheid South African schools.

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