

The background of the header is a black and white photograph of a classical building facade, showing ornate stone carvings and architectural details.

# How to distract yourself from the unrelenting hopelessness of British politics in 2019

EDINBURGH OPINION PEOPLE

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I'll preface this by stating, right from the off, that this is not going to be some kind of diatribe promoting my own personal brand of politics. Indeed, in the current climate, I'm not sure I could even convince myself to lean towards any particular end of the spectrum.

There's certainly a direct correlation between the duration of this drawn-out circus and my apathy towards it all. There's only so much space in our heads, and in a few generations' time, we'll probably all be living in space anyway, so can we just move on from this trivial nonsense?

But inevitably, I do find myself spending more time thinking about what it means to be

elected, or how voting works, and how this has changed over time. Maybe there's something out there in trivia-land to distract me for a minute or two.

One interesting nugget I semi-remembered from a podcast (I think) is around sortition. I'd never heard of it before, but it's very closely related to the way we currently choose jurors in the UK. In other words, people are randomly selected to serve a particular function (or hold a particular office) from a larger pool of equally-qualified candidates.

Sortition was originally developed in ancient Athens, and was considered one of the founding cornerstones of Athenian democracy. It sounds slightly worrisome when you first come across this idea, as in practice it means that you could receive a letter tomorrow stating that you've been selected to essentially run the city you live in for the next year, no questions asked. You have to give up your day job, and hold public office until your term is over.

On the other hand, sortition minimalises any form of group-forming, partisan behaviour, and consequently, in-fighting and factionalism. What would be the point in making promises to some supposedly important portion of the electorate, if you're only ever going to be appointed to office randomly? Electoral allocation, on the other hand (where you rely on a popular vote) nurtures factionalism. Aristotle wrote of sortition in ancient Athens that,

*"It is accepted as democratic when public offices are allocated by lot; and as oligarchic when they are filled by election."*

Again, to be clear, this isn't an advocacy of sortition. I'm no ancient Athenian, nor philosopher. But it certainly gave me food for thought, and for a time I was happily distracted.

I've also seen a lot of content around the fact that our last three prime ministers have come to power in ways that we aren't necessarily accustomed to (i.e. as the result of a general election) which again, sparked some kind of memory around people who have come to power in unusual ways.

Although his was not strictly an office of government, the memory that had been re-ignited was about a man called Fabian, who came to Rome around 236 AD. At that time, senior church officials were in the process of a papal election following the death of Pope Anterus.

The process took nearly two weeks, during which time prominent holy-men from throughout Christendom were duly considered by the church authorities. However, at some point throughout, a dove happened to descend to the crowd and land on Fabian's head. He was not previously being considered as a nominee, but to all present, that dove was apparently *obviously* the holy spirit itself, and so this man about whom we really know nothing else (apart from these accounts from the fourth-century Christian historian Eusebius of Caesarea) was immediately declared the new leader of the catholic church, and we know him now as Pope Fabian.

I'm not sure this need to be made explicit (I hope not) but just to be clear, I doubt the veracity of the above account, but it's a nice story. When looking to be distracted, we could do worse than nice stories.

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