

Lesson in citizenship from ancient Athens



**Bettany
Hughes**

I was recently given a lift to a literary festival by a nice bloke called Ray. He was considering life as a teacher. As we drove through the Borders, I found that the subject that really fired him was citizenship. Hearing we'd just come back from filming a series about Athenian democracy, he said: "That's great – to know where we're going, we've got to know where we've come from." I couldn't have put it better.

Discovering that other epochs have struggled to forge political systems and had huge achievements and dismal failures is inspirational. Appreciating that, as a species, we've gone through this turmoil before is some comfort. The fact that the ancient Athenians invented a proto-computer to ensure random selection of officials (to stop corruption) or designed a metal disc that could be held between thumb and forefinger to conceal the "guilty" or "not guilty" (to ensure a secret ballot), and trampled on pigs' testicles before a legal case was heard (hence the word "testifying") drives home how fundamental these issues are. Political structure is not the posturing of self-seeking Westminster-addicts, but a universal human need.

To re-engage with politics, children need to remember, and Athenian history is a rich seam to tap. When we ask pupils to cherish the political process, to understand the ethical implications of their actions, to enjoy advocacy, ancient Athens is an ideal sounding board. Here is citizenship with bells on. In the fifth century BC, every male Athenian citizen was a politician. All had to learn the art of rhetoric. There was no separation between church, state and judiciary, so each man contributed to the spiritual life of his *polis*; all could prosecute in the law courts or act as jurors; all could preside as state officials.

But whip off those rose-tinted spectacles. The democratic experiment in Athens was possible because society was buttressed by slaves (one in three was "unfree") and the closest women get to direct political engagement is as a joke in one of Aristophanes' comedies. This city championed free speech, yet Socrates spoke his mind freely and was executed. But these uncomfortable truths are themselves pertinent. Times change, and even *demos-kratia* needs to be re-evaluated constantly to ensure it serves the needs of today's citizens.

Ancient history will never lose its relevance: it allows us to examine the mainsprings of society without current political currents muddying the waters.

**Bettany Hughes's two-part series
Athens: The Truth About Democracy
begins on Channel 4, July 21 at 8pm**