CHAPTER SIX
THE SPEED OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

_Time is to politics what space is to geometry._

...political time is out of synch with the temporalities, rhythms, and pace governing economy and culture.
Sheldon Wolin, (1997)

Précis

As Debray’s quotation indicates, time is central to the political process, and in the quote from Wolin we see the observation of a temporal disjuncture between politics and the economy. In this chapter it is argued in some detail why this is the case. It is suggested, moreover, that some disturbing consequences flow from this idea. To do this the temporal perspective is applied in particular to the processes of liberal democracy. The emerging theory attempts to make more explicit the rhythms and tempo—the contextually derived timescape, in other words—of liberal democracy, the preeminent political system in the world today. Liberal democracy is a form of political representation that came into being over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries. And like the dynamics of modernity and industrialism that have become so much part of its evolution, liberal democracy is ‘time loaded’ and ‘conditioned’ by the context of its creation. The timescapes that are at its core reflect a world that had a very different temporality from our own. As it evolved and spread, liberal democracy developed specific institutions and traditions that broadly reflected these bass-line rhythms. It was a form of politics that was able to lead and shape the economy, culture and society for much of the 18th and 19th centuries. Given the relatively unsophisticated technological levels of ‘connectedness’ that governed the potential of the temporal context at that time, liberal democracy could function ‘fast’ enough to develop this leading role. However, as we will see, over the passage of time, the institutions of liberal democracy are also prone to inertia. A major consequence is that as its institutions of power become slower in comparison with an always growing and accelerating industrialization process, then liberal democracy becomes less able to
lead and begins to react more to the developments (and imperatives) of capitalism and capitalist modernity.

Through this perspective, the chapter reveals that during the post-World War Two phase, the era of ‘high Fordism’, there was something of an interregnum in the inexorable temporal disconnection of the polity from economy and society. Indeed during this period politics was able, albeit in cooperation with capital and labour, to lead once more and utilize the processes of what was a social democracy to make positive changes in the lives of people. Importantly, these decades constituted the zenith of the democratic process within the ‘arc of time’—as Deb-ray put it (2007:6)—that was most conducive to it delivering upon its historical responsibilities. The rise of neoliberal globalization, the ICT revolution and the network society during the 1980s signaled the end of the social democratic experiment. Social and economic acceleration has made the temporal disconnection even more profound and have left the institutions of liberal democracy trailing in their wake. The major consequence has been an increasingly undemocratic society where the historical responsibilities of democracy (to articulate the needs and wants of people) are abandoned in favour of a neoliberal ‘democracy’ that is concerned first and foremost with creating the right business conditions for capitalism.

No time for politics

If we consider once more the concept of timescapes as a method of perceiving the temporal dynamics of human action—individual and social—and if we apply this to political theory and to political history, then a couple of profound (and alarming) conclusions force themselves onto our understanding the nature of politics and democratic political agency today.

The first is that the politics of liberal democracy (the system of representative democracy that is held commonly to be the most advanced means devised of achieving justice and fairness for the majority) is becoming disconnected from the dynamics of economy and society in the age of globalization and the ICT revolution. Second, and related, is that liberal democracy is increasingly unable to fulfill its most basic function, which is to represent the civil and political rights of the people, the demos.