It is always odd to learn about democracy from elites. This is especially true when they are politicians who distort the nature of democracy in their rhetoric. Thus their common talk in praise of the middle class as the basis for democracy rarely discusses the middle class as a group that provides a basis for communication and even political compromise between the rich and the poor, or the middle class who in terms of character behaves in a way that avoids extremes of either arrogance or obsequiousness that is a great temptation for the rich and the poor respectively. Instead politicians often merely assume that if the middle class are the biggest group in society, and are rich enough, then they just won’t need much done for them by government. They mistake social order for democracy, so that any society that is orderly so that the mass of people don’t have complaints must be democratic. In other words any society that gets the support of the mass of people according to them is democratic which means almost all societies are democratic.

In some ways 18th century America is a better model for Third World democracies than present-day America because our leaders knew then how to get public support through embodying as well as enforcing public morality, not merely trying to bribe the population with bread and circuses, which only works as long as the economy is good.

A book that very much recounts some of the dilemmas of modern democratic politics, particularly the tendency to go from mass political interest as a social ideal to privatism and disdain of politics as being inferior to absorption in individual ambition and then back again is Albert O. Hirschman, *Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action* (Hirschman 2002). He starts by distinguishing between pleasure that arises from emotional peaks (that are inherently difficult to sustain) and comfort (like air temperature and a happy family life) that are a truer source of happiness since they are more consistent and reliable than simple pleasures, yet are so easily taken for granted and noticed mostly when they are missing. Involvement in public affairs,
like involvement in family life, in many ways evens-out “emotional highs” as a source of personal fulfilment, but because political activism is so often initiated because of propaganda campaigns and unrealistic idealism it often leads to disillusionment and feelings of futility, while returning to concern merely for private pleasures in fact often leads to unrealistic hedonism that is not sustainable, leading easily to satiation, and ultimately to boredom. “Just as the public life comes as a relief from the boredom of the private life, so does the latter provide a refuge from the paroxysm and futility of public endeavors.” (Hirschman 2002: 129)

As a matter of fact this book gives reference to another interesting book, Themes of Work and Love in Adulthood (Smelser and Erikson 1980) which shows some of the unreality of the modern division of labor between work that has become so utterly instrumental that it is hard to find personal meaning (or “love”) for it, and an idealization of private personal endeavors that are a search for “love” that cannot be realistically fulfilled because that which is enjoyed must reflect some effort, some commitment, not mere endless consumption of pleasure. It is a lesson as old as Plato’s that happiness is not mere itching and then scratching and is in need of constant reminding just because there is so much profit to be made in idle promises, the appealing to fantasy function of modern mass media and its political adjuncts.

In fact American politicians tend to refuse to discuss what most everyone discussed in the 18th century at the time of America’s founding, again that old story, that America is a mixed polity with democratic, aristocratic and monarchical elements, though admittedly the democratic elements have become more and more important over time (see The Creation of the American Republic 1776–1787 (Wood 1998)). American politicians certainly never discuss how America’s presidential democracy is different from Europe’s parliamentary democracy. Europe’s democracy has fewer checks and balances, less emphasis on separation of powers, and is both more democratic and often more unstable. That is why European states sometimes fluctuate between many governments one after the other, as during Germany’s Weimar Republic, and rule by decree, which is the ultimate repudiation of democracy even when it is claimed to be the true will of the people as in the case of Hitler, Mussolini, and to a much lesser extent, Charles de Gaulle in France.

The theory of American government originally was that the notables of the community would be elected by acclamation, which is