Reading – Scanning for answers

Scan the following passage for answers to the questions below:

1. What is it that distinguishes the hedgehog and the fox?

2. How does this reflect on the distinction between democracy and authoritarianism?

3. What does the author mean by ‘one of the crueller ironies of the twentieth century’?

4. According to Freedom House what characteristics determined whether a country could be described as democratic?

5. Why do many countries fear losing their democratic freedoms?

6. Why do some leaders fear democracy?

7. What is the new form of authoritarianism that has emerged over the last few years?

The Hedgehog and the Fox

In his essay *The Hedgehog and the Fox* Isaiah Berlin quotes a line from the Greek poet Archilochus which says: ‘The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.’ As Berlin explains, ‘there exists a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything to a single vision...and, on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory.’[[1]](#endnote-1)1 Within many modern democracies there appear to be small groups directing a rising tide of authoritarianism, who have decided that it is better to ensure that most people know just one big thing, than to allow many people to know many things.

In this lies one of the crueller ironies of the twentieth century. While most leaders around the world persisted in describing their political systems as democratic, the majority of the world’s population lived under non-democratic systems of government. During the last two decades of the twentieth century it appeared that democracy was taking a hold in every corner of the world. Just a few years before, the overwhelming majority of the members of the United Nations were not democratic, but by 1996 Freedom House was reporting that 118 of the 191 member countries had competitive elections and guarantees of political and individual rights. In fact this number had more than doubled in just twenty-five years.

More of the world’s population, therefore, are faced with the problem of the hedgehog and the fox, wondering how long they will retain their new found freedoms without deep roots in the values and processes of democracy. In many of these new democracies a tradition of blind submissiveness to authority is not only being kept alive, but is getting stronger. A growing number of political and religious leaders appear convinced that allowing the individual scope for independent political and moral judgement has brought with it the worst of the problems associated with western democracies. As individuals heedlessly pursue their own self-interests and as crime and drug abuse increase, along with homelessness, poverty and the breakdown of the traditional sense of community, the forces of authoritarianism appear to be strengthening.

This wouldn’t be quite so troubling if it were just a few insecure individuals retreating from western society into an extremist political group bent on some messianic display of political martyrdom, or into the secure embrace of a religious sect intent on drowning their anguished souls in the aura of a leader’s charisma. But now, in fact, over the last few years we have seen the emergence of a new authoritarianism or, rather, an old one in new clothes. Political systems, indeed whole cultures, seem to be battling between the conflicting demands of authoritarian populism, with its unbending desire to return to an idealised past, and democracy, with its commitment to pragmatism and the freedom for independent judgement.

Answer:

The Hedgehog and the Fox

1. The fox knows many things, while the hedgehog knows just one big thing.

2. In democracies there are many different opinions, whereas in authoritarian regimes there is just one official view.

3. The author means that while most leaders described their systems of government as democratic, the majority of the world’s population lived under non-democratic systems of government.

4. The characteristics are that they have competitive elections and guarantees for political and individual rights.

5. They fear losing their democratic freedoms because their freedoms do not have deep roots in the values and processes of democracy.

6. They fear democracy because they suspect that individuals freely pursuing their own self-interests produces crime and drug abuse, homelessness, poverty and the breakdown of traditional community.

7. The new form of authoritarianism that has emerged is authoritarian populism.

1. 1 Berlin, Isaiah, ‘The Hedgehog and the Fox’, in *Russian Thinkers* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p. 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)