

## **The Erosion of Canadian Democracy**

Canada's federal election is now history. The Liberals saw their huge majority reduced to 155 seats in the 301 seat House of Commons. The election campaign was fractious and had little substance. It featured empty slogans and appealed to the lowest common denominator. The public was frustrated. This showed in the low voter turnout, the lowest in any federal election since 1925. Nearly one-third of the electorate stayed away from the polls. Apathy is increasing.

There are numerous reasons for this phenomenon. Political scientists claim that Canadians were displeased with the early election call. Many believed that Prime Minister Chretien should have waited until the fall, as his government had been in power for less than four years. But there are deeper underlying reasons.

Many Canadians have become cynical about politics and politicians. On the one hand many look to the government to bring about the good of society by exercising control over an ever-increasing range of human activities. On the other hand there is a lack of trust. La Presse journalist Andre Pratte wrote a book in which he contends that politicians are liars when they assume power and break the promises they made to the electorate. And many Canadians agree with Pratte. They see little difference between Canada's two major parties since Confederation, the Liberals and the Conservatives. Both parties differ little in their philosophical approach. Their differences have centred on specific issues and personalities, the quality of their leadership. Hence, political parties based on specific ideology or faith commitment have always been torn in the flesh for Liberals and Conservatives.

Many Canadians have a fatalistic attitude about the influence they can exercise over their government. They want to feel that they have some power over the forces that shape their lives and society. The meteoric rise of the populist Reform Party is an expression of this desire. Voters also watch as the party in power dispenses favours of one kind or another: patronage appointments of senators, judgeships, appointments to boards and commissions.

Canadians snicker when they hear their Prime Minister say that his majority government is the will of the people, knowing full well that his party had only 38 per cent of the popular vote, with the vast majority of the seats in Ontario.

Can democracy survive in Canada? I believe that democracy is being eroded. It seems to have been reduced to a trip to the polls every four years or so. There is a new sense of fragility of democratic institutions. Nowhere in the world does democracy exist securely and few countries are blessed with relatively democratic governments.

### **Democracy: a definition**

During the political upheavals in Eastern Europe in 1989, a rallying cry from the crowds in the street was "We are the people." Everyone thought that they knew what it meant, and most of them believed that a democratic form of government was their right. But

democracy is hard to define. Literally, it means government by the people as a whole rather than by a special class of citizens. According to this view a legitimate government is a government by the consent of the governed, a government for the people and by the people.

Winston Churchill's words - that democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others - are famous. Yet he didn't say what he meant by democracy He just assumed that it's a matter of voting for representatives, as in the British or U.S electoral system. In his book *Models of Democracy*, David Held recognizes no less than ten different models of democracy Robert A. Dahl describes it as a political system in which the opportunity to participate in decisions is widely shared among all adult citizens.

Canadian democracy has been summed up as majority consent **to be ruled by** minority. And this consent can be renewed or transferred to another minority by the will of the majority expressed through periodic elections. A worker at the CN rail-yards reflects the feelings of many when he said, "I never thought elections were such a great deal. You get to vote once every four years and then they get to do whatever they want to you for the next four years. And this is the great process of democracy."

### **History of democracy**

Although Western democracy has been shaped by Christianity, the Bible has not been as influential in the development of democracy as the Greek, Roman and other secular political traditions. In ancient Greece, democracy was direct. The philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) taught that politics is free people deliberating the question, "How ought we to order our life together?" In his view the people deliberate and decide that question. Citizens did not vote for members to represent them; they were expected to participate themselves in the political decisions that affected their lives. To accomplish direct democracy, the Greeks in Athens met, deliberated and voted on issues almost once a week for two centuries. A far cry from current Canadian political practises where the electorate has little involvement in the decision-making process that shapes their lives.

Although democracy has its roots in ancient Greece, modern democracy didn't receive full attention until the 19th century. Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), English philosopher and legal theorist, believed that the only good government was derived from the people; the interest of the people needed to be the same as the interest of the government. He reasoned that kings as well as other people ought to keep their promises to secure the greatest happiness of the greatest number. He had an optimistic view of human nature. In 1776 he wrote in his anonymous *Fragment on Government*,

The age we live in is a busy age; in which knowledge is rapidly advancing towards perfection. In the nature world, in particular, everything teems with discovery and improvement.

In 1865, English historian William Lecky offered an almost classical 19th century Liberal explanation of how democracy came into being. He saw the increase of wealth and

knowledge as predominant factors; roads, the printing press, universities and Protestantism were also important contributors. He also attributed democracy to rationalism, as expressed in the "triumph of tolerance," and the growth of free trade.

Many scholars point to the godless French Revolution of 1789. The National Assembly abolished traditional feudal privileges and issued the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizens. The spirit of the French Revolution by and large defined the 19th century political spectrum. But full participation of all citizens in the western democratic process is essentially a 20th century development. When the famous two *volumes Democracy in America* by the French author Alexis de Tocqueville were published in 1835 and 1840, no one questioned the appropriateness of the title, despite the fact that only white males were full citizens who possessed the right to vote.

### **The erosion of democracy**

In 1949, UNESCO sent a questionnaire to scholars in many countries to find out what was meant by democracy. The inquiry showed that democracy is marked by ambiguity and vagueness.

The word can be interpreted in many different ways. Its definition depends on one's views. For example, a communist commending China as a "democracy" cannot mean quite the same thing as a liberal democrat similarly commending the United States. I suppose that in our Canadian context it is generally understood as the freedom to choose a government, freedoms of speech, worship, publication, association and movement. But let us now look at some of the forces at work eroding our sense of democracy.

### **Totalitarianism**

Secular politics is by its very nature a threat to freedom. The political correctness movement goes against the democratic spirit. If you are opposed to extending same spouse benefits to homosexuals you are called homophobic. Political correctness stifles honest political dialogue. Ironically, these same people, who are oh so politically correct and claim to be champions of freedom, gag people. Today in our multicultural society any member of parliament who has strong views and retains them when they are unpopular is considered guilty of "arrogance... elitism... and undemocratic behaviour." This is incomprehensible and bizarre.

Parliament and legislatures are increasingly responsive to pressure tactics by extreme feminists, gay rights lobbyists and other such anti-family groups. Our Liberal government is more interested in business than in human rights. It is eager to do business with Red China and Cuba while turning a deaf ear to the cries of Christians in prison and concentration camps who are persecuted for nothing more than their faith in Christ.

The practice of participatory democracy is not easy at the present. Only a tiny minority play an active role in party politics. In general few believe that they can make any

difference in shaping party platforms. And political parties not in government are always at a disadvantage when it comes to election readiness as the responsibility for calling an election rests entirely upon the Prime Minister and how he judges the mood of the electorate. Once in office, the party in power does what it wants. During the last term in office the Liberal government rammed through parliament Bill C41, with the intent to include "sexual orientation" in the Canadian Human Rights Act, a bill in conflict with the wishes and the interests of many Canadians.

The Prime Minister also appoints senators. The unelected Canadian Senate was constructed as a chamber of "sober second thought" to check any radical excesses of the House of Commons. But due to patronage appointments and its lack of accountability to the public there is an increasing clamour for either its reform or to abolish it altogether.

### **The tyranny of the majority**

Democracy has been called the rule by the majority of the people. Some even assert that Majorities Are Always Right. A British Fleet Street advertising slogan insists "A paper with five million readers cannot be wrong." This slogan is nonsense, of course. Right and wrong cannot be based on majority votes. On certain occasion five million readers might be wrong. Presume that all of them would favour abortion on demand - it would not make abortion right. The majoritarian principle opens the door for tyranny. History shows that majorities are quite capable of perpetuating injustice on a grand scale. It is possible that a majority may unduly dominate or even oppress a minority.

### **Discrimination against Christians**

Christians are virtually excluded from public affairs. Religion has been regulated exclusively to the area of private life. The debates around public school issues, the trends in organized labour, and lack of any Christian reference in political discourse are clear indications of this. Christians are dismissed as too absolutist for our pluralistic society. Anti-abortionists are called fanatics who want to impose their version of morality on Canadian society. Citizens who consider homosexuality immoral are called bigots. But the exclusion of the Christian voice is undemocratic, a form of religious oppression and a violation of human rights. It is time for Christians to speak out boldly against the disenfranchisement of their faith.

### **The media**

Political discourse has greatly suffered from the onslaught of the modern media. The media determine what news we ought to hear and not just how it is reported. The last election campaign has also demonstrated once again that objective and impartial reporting is hard to come by. Many journalists were busy promoting their own liberal agenda.

Television has become a vital component in elections. However, it lends itself more for entertainment than for serious instruction. People are used to seeing images and hearing sound bites, and are no longer inclined to follow in-depth political debates. Politicians have become part of the world of show business. Looks and impressions have become more important than substance. For example, during the election campaign much was made of Preston Manning's new hairstyle and his casual clothes. After the so-called TV debate between the five party leaders commentators were more concerned about who gave the best one-liner, and how they smiled, looked and reacted, rather than about the content. Television does not reveal who the best man is. Neil Postman commented in his powerful book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* that "we may have reached the point where cosmetics has replaced ideology as the field of expertise over which a politician must have competent control." And the political commercials are even a graver threat to intelligent political discourse. In a matter of seconds and with a great splash, the most difficult political problems facing the nation are featured and solved. I wholeheartedly concur with Postman's suggestion that political commercials should be preceded by a short statement to the effect that "common sense has determined that watching political commercials is hazardous to the intellectual life of the community."

### **The courts**

One particular worrying trend in Canada is the way the courts have overruled parliament and legislatures. Ever since the Charter of Rights and Freedoms was established in 1982, a real danger lies in the way the courts have usurped powers that once belonged to elected representatives. Unelected judges have emerged as the markers of social policy. They have now the power to amend and strike down laws passed by the people's elected representatives. The most important moral, political and social decisions affecting our daily lives are now rapidly being removed from democratic control.

### **The family**

The family is essential for a healthy democracy. Education takes place within the family unit. Children are taught responsibility and duty, right from wrong, and respect for authority. The family is independent of the state. The state exists to serve the family. Whenever there is a demand for increasing state control in public life, the family is attacked. Our unelected judges are busy trying to redefine the family. In 1993, the Supreme Court of Canada narrowly ruled that the term "immediate family" used in collective government agreements did not include same-sex couples. In a dissenting opinion, Justice L'Heureux-Dubé said that "the traditional family is not the only family form and nontraditional family forms may equally advance true family values." Recently, a "gay rights" advocate said in a CBC interview that parents who don't allow their children access to teaching about homosexuality and lesbians are guilty of "child abuse." He said that his group was working closely with the Ministry of Education in British Columbia to ensure that it would be viewed as such.

## **Proportional representation**

Canada still operates with the antiquated and undemocratic electoral system that produces artificial majorities where natural ones rarely exist. Consequently, there is no fair representation in this country. It also works against small principled parties. In each riding the candidate who receives the most votes, whether or not it is the majority of the votes cast, is declared the winner. Reform MP Paul Foseth won his New Westminster-Burnaby seat in 1993 with just 29% of the vote. Only the United States, Great Britain, and Canada still have this "first-past-the-post" system.

After each election there are calls for proportional representation but nothing ever happens. The party in power will not let go of this unfair electoral system, as it keeps them in government even when a large percentage of the electorate voted for other parties. Some even call our federal government an "elected dictatorship."

If, in the last federal election, the seats had been apportioned based on proportional representation the following would have been the result (the number in brackets is the actual number of seats won):

Liberal 116 (155)  
Reform 58 (60)  
Progressive Conservatives 57 (20)  
New Democratic Party 33 (21)  
Bloc Quebecois 33 (44)  
Green Party 2 (0)  
Christian Heritage Party 1 (0)  
Natural Law Party 1 (0)

Proportional representation is not a novel idea. It was already suggested by the 19th century British philosopher John Stuart Mill. He believed that proportional representation is a means by which the voice of minority groups can at least be heard.

## **Normed democracy**

Scripture does not mention democracy. It does not even discuss the ideal form of government, but it is normative for our political life. It does offer a framework for principles supportive of democracy. The authoritative Word of God provides standards, statutes, laws, and guidelines by which we ought to order political ideas and action. Though not an end to itself, a democracy normed by Scripture can serve as a crucial means for advancing justice, righteousness, responsibility, and stewardship. The prophetic vision of Amos 5:24 in which "justice rolled like a mighty stream" laid a sound basis for the struggle for freedom and social justice in the course of history. A nation is in peril when it no longer abides by Biblical standards. Barrister and solicitor David Brown of the Bar of Ontario noted that

For a democracy, such as ours, to rely simply on the will of the majority, without providing the majority with any guiding principles for distinguishing good laws from bad, risks reducing law-making to an exercise by those who wield the most

power at any point of time. Rules which rely for their foundation only on their usefulness to the majority, in the end rely on the exercise of power alone.

A Christian approach to politics recognizes Jesus Christ as Lord. This means that Christians should reject every ideology that puts man on the throne and proclaims him as the sole authority. Every earthly authority is subordinate to the sovereignty of Jesus Christ. Only Jesus Christ can legitimately lay claim to every area of our lives.

### **Conclusion**

I believe that democracy is the best way of structuring justice and freedom. But the loyalty of Christians is first to Jesus Christ and not to a political system. The systems of the world will pass away; the kingdom of God abides forever. As citizens of two kingdoms we need to be politically involved and oppose the rapid erosion of Canadian democracy. Someone rightly said, "It's not democracy that makes men good, but good men who make democracy."

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