

Democracy In Canada Can Still Be Improved

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London Free Press, June 1, 2013

Ideally there is much about democratic governments that is compatible with ethical systems. For example, democracies pay attention to opinions of their fellow citizens. They balance the needs of the wealthy and the poor. Democracies often have social systems that look after health care and educational needs and seek justice and fairness for all. Most adult citizens can vote at election time and choose those they want to represent them. In most democracies, those who wish may run for elected positions.

In democratic court cases, citizens can be judged by a jury of peers and are presumed innocent until proven guilty. Freedom of thought on religious and political issues is valued. Along with this democratic right, citizens may speak and write in the public media provided they respect the free speech of fellow citizens. When travelling abroad, citizens can expect their own democratic government will be protective and helpful in assisting them.

Most citizens from democratic countries feel fortunate to grow up in environments where their opinions and votes count. What I have presented is a picture of how ethical democracies work in ideal conditions. Now let us consider our Canadian system of government and take a look at what, if anything, can be improved. The following points are meant as fine-tuning our Canadian democratic procedures without upsetting our system or requiring constitutional changes.

* Canada is now the only remaining democratic country that does not elect its senators. For over twenty years, Alberta has urged other Canadian provinces to hold provincial elections to choose senate nominees. These recommendations to the Governor General and the Prime Minister are meant to fill vacant positions of senators. In 1989 the Prime Minister at the time refused to accept the senate nominee elected by Alberta. Fortunately, in the Alberta elections of April 23, 2012 three senate nominees were elected and Prime Minister Stephen Harper acted in Jan. 25, 2013 and March 25, 2013 on the appointment of two nominees. The third nominee is expected to be similarly appointed to represent the next Senate vacancy for the district.

* Free flow of information is required so citizens can vote wisely. Often, governments spend tax payers' money conducting surveys, but do not share the information widely with their electorate.

* Parliamentary decorum is lacking. Members of Parliament who shout insults at each other cause many citizens to be dismayed or disappointed by our system of government.

* Political appointments are heavily weighted in favour of giving our Prime Ministers additional powers. The following appointments are controlled by our Prime Ministers: all cabinet members, all deputy ministers, Clerk of the Privy Council, the Governors General, the Chief Justice, all other supreme court justices, all Auditors General, Heads of crown corporations, Heads of government agencies, all members of the Senate, Parliamentary secretaries, the Government whip, and Chairs of Commons committees and Chair of the Ethics Committee. In total, this list includes approximately 500 important positions.

* Our voting procedure, known as the "first past the post", enables the winning party to become the majority, even when it may have as little popular support as 35% of Canadians who voted. Many European countries have moved to a more democratic system of "proportional representation".

* Many political parties move towards privatization of government services. For example, when prison services are run privately, members of parliament are removed from direct involvement. They distance themselves from the process and become less accountable to the general public.

* Strict party discipline requires that members of parliament vote according to the party line, rather than to the electorate they represent.

* The date for calling elections and/or shutting down parliament is largely in the hands of the Premiers and the Prime Minister.

* Limited terms of office for the Prime Ministers and Premiers in Canada may help overcome corrupt practices.

* There are many additional changes, too numerous to discuss here, such as the proportion of women in parliament, overuse of Orders-in-Council, omnibus bills, and the relatively low turnout of voters in Canadian elections. Yet, these more democratic changes can be implemented without constitutional changes or extra expense. What is needed is a change of attitude towards more ethical democratic input, and the drive to make our system function for the good of all Canadians.