Counterattack

Towards True Democracy

Henry Beissel

In the first two *Counterattack* essays, we have shown how democracy in Canada (and elsewhere) is being undermined and perverted ("Sham Democracy", *HP* 180) and how the country as a whole, and every citizen individually, are victimized as a result of the corruption of democracy ("Everything is Just Fine", *HP* 181). It is time now to consider what concrete steps can be taken that might remedy the situation.

Two peaceful approaches are open to us – one *legislative*, the other *systemic*. By the legislative approach I mean that we as citizens prevail upon our elected members at the appropriate level of government – municipal, provincial and federal – to enact legislation designed to correct the course of our ship of state which is now headed into the churning waters of a whole horde of hurricanes. We might, for instance, demand that legislation provide for proper taxation of individuals and corporations – with no loopholes! – and for fixing a cap on the income an individual can earn. This would be one of a number of important steps towards putting an end to the obscene social inequality and injustice which are sweeping us towards a disastrous economic and civil storm, the first signs of which are already evident in growing unemployment, poverty and inflation, both in Canada and in the rest of the world.

Or we might insist that governments at all levels enact laws to protect our environment. Municipal governments might restrict the use of cars within city limits by creating no-drive zones during daylight hours and issuing costly licences valid only on alternating days. Provincial and federal governments might be constrained to cease building new highways, to reduce speed limits (especially for those furiously polluting trucks), impose higher taxes on gasoline, and collect tolls on major highways. Governments would, of course, be bound to apply revenues from these and similar measures towards providing cheap and efficient public transportation – bus and light rail service in the cities, and a much more developed train system to connect cities from coast to coast and move people and freight efficiently and at low cost. These would constitute major steps towards reducing pollution significantly.

> 'It is time to put an end to politics by personality cult. Swagger and charisma do not guarantee rational or enlighten policies. Megalomania is the hallmark of dictators, and they have no place in a democracy.'

Or, in an even more important area of environmental protection, the citizenry might move government (as is customary in a true democracy) to apply strict measures to force industry to reduce the pollution of our air, water and soil. Without such effective power by the electorate, corporations determine, as they do now, what is and what is not to be done on the basis of their principle of operation: the maximization of profits. As a result, 15 years after the Kyoto Protocol (1997), Canada is nowhere near meeting even the moderate mandatory limits on greenhouse gas emissions established by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. So, Global Warming is rapidly changing our climate, and increasingly catastrophic weather events

(drought, floods, tornados and hurricanes) make it clear that our planet will not support 7 billion members of a species determined to plunder every niche of their habitat to satisfy their greed, egotism and addiction to power, material possession and hedonistic pleasure.

Among the many other measures the legislative approach would have to develop are ways to introduce laws to guarantee education at the highest level and proper health care for all. It would require new concepts of education in the digital age that would be firmly rooted in a study of the humanities and the sciences instead of reducing the process to mere vocational training, the route current education is travelling. As far as health care is concerned, it would mean ending the preposterous exclusion of dental care from universal health care as well as a public and frank discussion about what we can afford to provide freely and what not. In matters of war and peace, the citizenry must provide a framework that prevents governments from gratuitous armament, and from engaging in wars, openly or clandestinely, against nations that are not actually attacking us with force of arms. The military should be returned to peacekeeping duties, and any declaration of war must be sanctioned by the will of the majority.

I could go on listing legislative steps that will have to be taken to make of Canada a socially just and free society. None of them come down from on high, carved in stone tablets. All would have to be developed, adjusted and refined in open discussions among all Canadians. Nor are any of the proposals particularly original. Most of them have been advanced at one time or another, in one form or another, by individuals and groups for decades, if not centuries. But they have not been incorporated in the law of the land. And there lies the rub.

For the legislative approach to succeed, it has to operate in a truly democratic environment, and ours is fundamentally and seriously flawed, as I've argued in "Sham Democracy" (HP 180). We need to write a new social contract, but to do so requires a political framework that allows for the will of the majority to prevail. In other words, what we need is a *systemic* approach designed to put political power back in the hands of the people. So long as the political process is set up to perpetuate a superannuated system of political parties, and so long as these act directly or indirectly to serve themselves and the corporate sponsors that get them elected, the changes that are necessary for the creation of a true democracy are impossible even to discuss, let alone implement – because

Wikipedia: Parthenon, photo by user: Thermos. Reproduced and modified under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.5 Generic icense.

they run directly contrary to the mercenary interests of an entrenched ruling class.

However, before we can embark productively on the road to making Canada a truly democratic country, we need to reflect on the nature of government and its relationship to the citizenry. Too many people see themselves in an adversarial, even hostile relationship with government. We think of government as licensing, i.e. permitting us to drive, to build, to travel, etc. By the same token, politicians too often think in terms of *ruling* the country, demanding taxes to finance their own notions of things, making sure that people obey the laws they have established, etc. Thereby they foster this undemocratic us-against-them attitude. We must disabuse ourselves of such quasi-fascist views, especially at a time when there are disturbing signs across North America that governments are embracing increasingly quasi-fascist measures to intrude in, and even exercise control over, our private lives, as they chip away at liberties and rights it took centuries of struggle to obtain.

It is of fundamental importance that we remind ourselves as well as those we elect that politicians hold their office solely because we entrust it to them by our vote, that we pay their (extravagant) wages and that they are accountable to us every step of the way. Politicians are elected to carry out the wishes of the people, not to rule them. We must know this to be true deep in our hearts of hearts and act accordingly, or we will drift further and further into autocratic rule. By the same token, politicians must not merely pay lip-service to the fact that they are public servants (while pursuing hidden agendas), they must also act accordingly – act to safeguard the common good, openly and without prejudice, holding the best interests of the community to be sacrosanct. It is time to put an end to politics by personality cult. Swagger and charisma do not guarantee rational or enlightened policies. Megalomania is the hallmark of dictators, and they have no place in a democracy.

'I could go on listing legislative steps that will have to be taken to make of Canada a socially just and free society. None of them come down from on high, carved in stone tablets.'

Once this is understood and accepted by everyone, the divide between politicians and the people becomes a mere matter of bureaucratic formality. Thereafter, the rest of the way is relatively easy – or it would be, if it were not for the corporate lobbies that manipulate politicians by their immense financial power. Whether they are cynical or deluded when they declare that what's good for them is good for us all, one look at the state of our society and the rapid decline of our economy tells us that it isn't so. That's why the *systemic* approach to our problems calls for major changes in our political practices to guarantee that they operate democratically for the benefit of all.

The first step on the road to a true democracy is the adoption of **Proportional Representation** (PR). Our electoral system of first-past-the-post-wins-all disenfranchises the majority of voters and produces a parliament that does not represent the will of the people as expressed by the ballots they cast. The current Conservative government came to power in the 2011 election with slightly less than 40% of votes cast. Since only just over 61% of Canadians bothered to vote – a measure of their trust in our political process! – It means that only about 25% of eligible Canadians voted for Stephen Harper. Yet this gave him 166 seats and therefore an absolute majority in the House.

Liberal governments have equally sabotaged the spirit of democracy via our undemocratic electoral policy. In 2000, the Liberals elected 172 members, i.e. slightly more than 57% of the seats. In actual fact, the Liberals received less than 41% of the popular vote, and if you factor in that only 64% of eligible voters cast a ballot, the Liberals represented a mere 26% of the electorate. In the same election, the PCs garnered 12 seats with a little over 12% of the vote – which means that the Liberals with less than 5 times the number of votes won 15 times the number of seats. It has become rare now for a "majority" government to actually represent the majority of Canadians.

The object of PR is to make sure that Parliament represents proportionally the votes cast in the election, i.e. that when, say, 30% of voters cast their ballot for Liberal candidates, the liberal Party will hold 30% of the seats in the House. There are various ways of achieving this. Among the 90 democracies in the world (cf. Wikipedia) that have adopted some form of PR, most have opted for additional candidates to be taken from lists published by the political parties before the election. But there are other methods, which need not concern us at this point. What matters is that no country can claim to be truly democratic that has not adopted a form of PR, and it is time for Canada to adopt some form of it. Voters in British Columbia and in Ontario were recently given a chance to opt for it; they turned it down by small margins.

The reason for this setback was an active campaign of misinformation and disinformation by those in power who are extremely comfortable with the current system because it frees them from having to listen to the people they rule – except during the charade of elections when they deliver promises they hope will get them elected which they promptly ignore once they are back in power. The scare tactics were quite amazing to behold. When I presented my ideas for "Twelve Steps to True Democracy" in a speech to the Canadian Association of the Club of Rome (October, 2007), a sitting (Conservative) MP chided me for "doing a disservice to Canada" by promoting PR. I wondered under what dictatorship he had acquired his political acumen.

One of the arguments paraded against PR is that it would fragment parliament and force coalition governments in perpetuity. Israel is usually cited as the best example of the disastrous policies that result from PR because it can enable a handful of bigots and lunatics with virtually no support in the country to force their bigotry upon a nation. The case of Israel is special, and a large part of its problems stems from the fact that it adopted a 1% electoral threshold. It means that any party that garners 1% of the vote must be represented in the House. The result is that Israel has 18 political parties in the Knesset.

Everywhere else in the world – in countries like Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Brazil, the Netherlands, Germany a.s.f. – the electoral threshold is 5% (in a few cases 4%), and parliamentary democracy is alive and flourishing in all of these countries. So, Israel is simply a red herring dragged into the argument to scare people into rejecting a fundamental step towards true democracy.

As for the charge that PR *always* means coalition government, the facts show that it is not so. But it is true that PR will *more often* result in coalitions forming the government than the current winner-take-all electoral process. And that is all to the good because it means that a greater part of the nation's political spectrum participates directly in the decision-making process. What could better guard the health of a democracy than people governing themselves?

This leads me to argue another important consequence of PR. It would militate against the alarming flight of the electorate from the polling booth. Fewer and fewer people, especially among the young, bother to exercise their right to vote because they know that unless their vote goes to the winning candidate they might as well stay home. Their vote will make no difference: it does not count in the make-up of government, it won't help bring to power people of integrity or of truly public spirit, and it won't curb what they see as growing government corruption. The proportion of the electorate voting has now sunk perilously close to 50%; it has sometimes even fallen below that. On that downward road lies disaster because people will seek other, often violent ways to make their views heard and count. It is a matter of urgency that we create a democracy in which all people are welcome and included as part of a power-sharing system.

Proportional Representation is only the first necessary step on that road. I hereby serve notice that, in the next instalment of *Counterattack*, I intend to propose and elaborate a series of further *systemic* steps. These will include strategies to make sure that parliament is made up of men and women in fair proportion, and that it includes a multiplicity of trades and professions, – strategies to hold political parties to their election promises; to allow elected members always to vote according to the wishes of their constituents rather than to the dictates of the party leader; to bring the wages and

expenditures of elected government members and officials under the direct control of non-partisan civilian bodies; to restrict the influence of corporations and industries on the political process through financial contributions; to create a level playing field for all eligible political parties; to make government decisions and the processes that lead to them open and transparent; to put an end to nepotism and sycophancy in political affairs by (a) selecting cabinet ministers from all parties in the House, and (b) abolishing the Senate and replacing it with a non-partisan civilian body whose members are not appointed as a reward for toadying to some politician or some party; and, perhaps most radical of all, to select a significant portion of any parliament in the manner in which we choose juries.

Voilà – we're on the road to true democracy.

Henry Beissel is a poet, playwright, essayist, translator and editor who has published over 30 books. He is Distinguished Emeritus Professor at Concordia University, Montreal, and now lives in Ottawa. www.HenryBeissel.com.

Canada's crime rate drops
Canada builds more prisons

Since the Conservatives took office 2005-06 the Correctional Service of Canada's budget expenditures has increased by 86.7 per cent.

Canada's crime rate peaked in 1991 and has since been dropping throughout Canada for most offences, including attempted murders, major assaults, sexual assaults, robberies, break-ins, and motor vehicle thefts.

Canadian federal, provincial and territorial governments are in the process of creating 10,600 new prison spaces — with an infrastructure cost of $3.6 billion (and rising).

Meanwhile, the percentage of the previous years' federal funding to Canadian youth justice programs has decreased by 20 per cent.

— Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

Call to our Readers

As Humanists we are committed to a world where reason and compassion prevail, both in the conduct of our private lives and in the governance of public affairs, so that all people, irrespective of age, gender, race or religion, can live their lives with dignity as free, tolerant and socially equal citizens.

Such a world of freedom and justice is now under attack everywhere. *Humanist Perspectives* is launching a series of Counterattacks intended to help put us back on the road to true democracy. Your input is essential.

We invite you, our readers, to respond vigorously and pen your own counterattacks in a cause that may well determine the future of our species.

Background photo by the Phantom Photographer.