

Return Power to the People

Henry Beissel

If further proof were needed to demonstrate that we live in a sham democracy (*CounterAttack 1, HP 180*), i.e. that the ability to determine their affairs has slipped from the hands of citizens, a glance at a couple of recent arbitrary decisions by the Ontario Provincial Government and the Government of Canada should persuade even the most sceptical that it's time steps are taken to return that power to the people.

"Our minority government has hit a roadblock, so we're going to tackle it another way," declared Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty in September. The "roadblock" was his government's failure to negotiate a new contract with the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation; the "other way" was to deprive the union of the right to strike and impose a wage freeze on teachers. The arrogance of this denial of collective bargaining is brought home dramatically by the fact that polls give McGuinty the support of only around 20 per cent of Ontarians.

This is the Premier who has also continued public funding for Catholic schools, for which the Ontario Provincial Government and the Federal Government of Canada have been condemned by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Having left the school system in shambles, and with another

political scandal threatening to blow up in his face, Dalton McGuinty resigned a month later, on October 15 – but not before shutting down the government indefinitely. Over two thirds of Ontarians were glad to see McGuinty go, but they were also outraged that, for purely self-serving reasons, he prorogued parliament, denying the province the right and the ability to continue to deal democratically with the many pressing problems in a time of high unemployment and a deteriorating environment.

On the federal scene, we were stunned on September 7, 2012, to hear our Minister of Foreign Affairs, John Baird, announce that Canada was closing its embassy in Iran and declare all remaining Iranian diplomats in Canada *persona non gratae*. Iran had done absolutely nothing to provoke such humiliation. If Canada has issues with Iran, the last thing to do is to sever diplomatic relations and rule out rational discussions and negotiations.

Discredited by the robo-calls scandal and its mendacity over the F-35 costs, Stephen Harper's government enjoys, like McGuinty's, only about 20 per cent popular support, yet it continues to act in defiance of the will of the people. The hidden rationale for breaking diplomatic ties with Iran is the need for the Conservative Party to secure the electoral and financial support

of the Jewish community in the next election. By stepping aside on the international stage, Canada now allows Israel to pursue its plans for military aggression against Iran. This same motive would also account for John Baird's shameless opportunism and moral hypocrisy in personally lobbying, last year at the UN, against Palestinian statehood.

Another example of our government's anti-democratic conduct is the recent omnibus budget Bill C-45. The Bill has 443 pages and includes proposed changes to the Indian Act, the Canada Labour Code, the Navigable Waters Protection Act and many other non-fiscal matters. By burying so many diverse legislative changes in a single bill, the government makes a detailed and responsible debate in the House impossible and commits MPs to a take-it or-leave-it vote. Is it unreasonable to suspect that the government is trying to slip an unpopular agenda past scrutiny? Last spring's omnibus budget of 425 pages also covered extensive heterogeneous ground and provoked 3,200 pages of responses from Canadians, not a single one of them approving. The government seems not to care what its citizens think.

As their minority approval demonstrates, the majority of Canadians do not condone or support autocratic government procedures or decisions. But do our various levels of government listen? No. They are beholden only to their corporate sponsors and their own appetite for power and privilege. So what can we do to put the dogs of greed and egomania on a leash?

At the risk of repeating myself, I want to stress that we need to take the first step in our own minds. We need to disabuse ourselves of the notion that governments rule and we are the

ruled. The function of government is to carry out the wishes, instructions and decisions of the electorate. To that end, politicians must be constantly consulting with the public, and in

important matters, like declarations of war and fundamental changes in education, economics and health care, put the issue to a referendum vote unless there is consensus.

It isn't enough for politicians to pay lip service to the idea that they are public servants; they must demonstrate that they are by listening to the voice of the public and acting accordingly. Whatever power we invest in our government representatives to enable them to discharge their mandate honourably, ultimate power must remain in the hands of the

people and politicians must be accountable to them at all times. Each one of us – the electorate and those we elect – must know and understand this in every recess of our minds and put an end to paternalistic government secrecy, obfuscation and manipulation.

We have already discussed the first essential systemic **Step 1** towards democracy, one that has been adopted already by many of the major democracies in the world: **Proportional Representation**. It is fundamental because it enables a government to better and more truly reflect the multiple perspectives and values of the electorate. This is especially important at a time when rapidly growing population numbers make it increasingly difficult for governments to maintain meaningful contact with members of the public. But it is a first step only and cannot, in and of itself, guarantee sagacious democratic government.

It is not enough to elect a body of politicians that properly represent the community. We must also make sure that they act upon the promises

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that got them elected. This is why **Step 2** must be made a requirement for parties and individuals running for election, namely to state concretely and specifically, in print (or digitally) before the election, which policies they plan to pursue in office. Once elected, they must adhere to these policies. If they feel compelled to deviate from them, they must either seek approval from the public in a referendum or resign from government. If a ruling political party proposes to operate on a different platform, it must call another election. We need to put an end to the current practice of making opportunistic promises only to promptly abandon them once in office.

Next we want to make sure that all parties in the election process have an equal chance to get their message to the people. We need politicians to be elected for their policies, not their personalities. To communicate their policies, they must have equal access to the media. Since their use, especially on TV, is astronomically expensive, individuals and parties are significantly advantaged when they enjoy the support of the wealthy sector of society and can raise large amounts of money to finance their promotions and campaigns. These “benefactors” expect them to legislate for their benefit, i.e. the benefit of large corporations and wealthy individuals, and their interests are most often diametrically opposed to those of the people at large. So, to create a level playing field and avoid conflicts of interest, I propose as **Step 3** that all political contributions be deposited in an impartially controlled fund that will be distributed among political parties in proportion to their actual representation in parliament. A special arrangement would have to be made for independent candidates. Perhaps the media should

be obliged to provide equal time and space free of charge to all parties and their candidates so that they can argue their case and better inform the general public.

Once elected, members of parliament must be free to vote according to their conscience and

in the interest of their constituents. The current practice of being obliged to vote according to the dictates of the party leader is undemocratic in the extreme. **Step 4** must, therefore, abolish the role of the party whip and the power of the party leader to determine a member’s vote and to penalize those who choose to vote in the best interest of their constituencies. No political party shall penalize a member for not voting with the party. It makes a mockery of democracy to permit members a “free vote” only on rare occasions. This is dictatorship, not democracy.

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In order for citizens to participate meaningfully in the political process, they must be honestly and fully informed. To that end, **Step 5** must make government transparent. No government official shall have the power to declare any document SECRET, except for a short period not exceeding a month for the purpose of showing cause before a judge why the document should be withheld from the public. Except where national security is demonstrably jeopardized, such court approval shall be denied. The default position for all official political and legislative activities must be unrestricted public accessibility.

It is crucial for an effective democratic government that an elected member of parliament be a part of the community he or she represents. While hand-shaking and ribbon-cutting may create a semblance of such kinship, the problem goes deeper. The representative must share the burdens (and the advantages) of life in the commu-

nity, and this can be achieved only by sharing the economic circumstances of fellow citizens. **Step 6** should, therefore, provide members of parliament with an income that lies within the ballpark of the average national. Since conflict of interest and other considerations militate against politicians determining their own salaries, as in most cases they still do, the precise salary scale must be determined by an independent body of citizens at arm's length from political interference. This body would also be charged to award special indemnities for additional work. Whatever procedures are chosen, their income should be brought closer to the income of the people they are supposed to represent.


Some might argue that average salaries would fail to attract the best minds for the job. But do we really want to entrust the nation's business to individuals whose public spirit is inspired by the public purse? Besides, given that our MPs now earn more than four times the average national income, do we really believe we now have the nation's best minds in government? MPs earn approx. \$155,000; the PM gets double that amount; cabinet ministers approx. \$230,000. Considering that the House generally sits about 100 days a year, and assuming that every MP attends every session (which they don't) that constitutes about 5 months of a regular workload. I let you do the math to figure out what their real income is relative to the wages paid ordinary citizens for regular jobs.

And I invite you to attend a parliamentary session in Ottawa and decide for yourself whether the level of debate is compatible with the best minds of the nation. In Athenian democracy, which did attract the best of Greek minds, no one was paid to participate in the democratic process; only the less affluent received a small stipend to enable them to attend parliamentary sessions. Instead, we have made of politics a lucrative profession that is more likely to attract those who seek power, privilege and riches than individuals dedicated to public service.

Since, in the age of population explosion, large numbers of elected members are required to represent the public adequately, and since decision-making becomes notoriously difficult

with growing numbers, an effective political process depends on a smaller body of members chosen from the whole. Currently, this is accomplished by Cabinet. **Step 7** would need to abolish the current practice of the party leader choosing his Cabinet from his party faithfuls. The practice promotes sycophancy and favouritism, and does a disservice to democracy. The cabinet should consist of members from all parties, and ministers should be chosen by lot from among those who have put their name in the hat. Fears that this would promote ministerial incompetence should be quickly allayed by the common practice of cabinet shuffles that can move an individual overnight from, say, Health to Justice. I have yet to encounter a minister who can reasonably claim such multiple competences. The real know-how in all ministries is always provided by the respective civil servants.

Every citizen is a potential politician: it requires nothing more than the application of common sense to public affairs. The Greeks defined Man as the *zoon politikon*, the *political animal*,



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and for Aristotle an individual became fully human only when he participated in the political process. An *idiot* in Greek is ‘a person ignorant of politics’. Representative democracy has made *idiots* of too many citizens. Part of the reason is the absurd notion of the *professional politician*. Any ordinary citizen should be able to exercise the right to participate in government. That is what participatory democracy is about. To contribute to this ideal, **Step 8** aims at ensuring greater turnover in government by prohibiting election more than twice to successive parliaments. It would also go some way towards reducing the growth of nepotistic old-boys networks and the corruption they spawn all too often.

There is a yet more radical way to involve ordinary citizens in the decision-making process of government. I suggest as **Step 9** that a percentage of the House of Commons, say 10 per cent of the total, i.e. between 30 and 40 additional seats, be chosen from different regions of the country in the manner in which the courts select juries from groups of citizens picked at random from telephone directories. This would offer an opportunity to correct the undemocratic imbalance in our parliament which now favours males and of certain professions: almost 83 per cent of our MPs are men; 40 per cent come from business, finance, and management occupations, another 38 per cent are drawn from the legal professions. These are the very people interested in perpetuating their privileges. The additional MPs drawn from the general public should be used to add more women to government as well as people from the ranks of nurses, farmers, teachers, factory workers, artists, the unemployed, and the young.

Finally, **Step 10**; let us retire the Senate – that gravy-train for men and women appointed to lifetime sinecures by the party in power for toadying long and loud enough to them and their politics.

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This has become a legalized form of shameless patronage. The occasional distinguished Canadian amongst them does not change the entirely undemocratic nature of the institution. In place of this expensive extravaganza, I suggest an **Assembly of Citizens**, perhaps half the size of the Senate, composed of individuals appointed by or elected in the provinces on the basis of good citizenship. Two or three members

from each province and territory should be sufficient. Their function would be to propose, scrutinize and veto government legislation.

These ten steps are fundamental to good, democratic governance. I offer them as proposals for a radical reform of our various forms of government. They need to be openly debated, refined and adjusted, but the principles that underlie them constitute the ethics of democracy. Those who believe with the Conservative Walter Lippmann that *the public must be put in its place...so that each of us may live free of the trampling and the roar of the bewildered herd.* (**The Phantom Public**, New York 1927) will have to look elsewhere for their ideal form of government. A *bewildered herd* is the product of an educational system designed to instil individuals with an insatiable appetite for heedless consumption. Their behaviour is then used to justify the right of the wealthy to power and privilege. I prefer to put my faith in the inherent decency and common sense of ordinary humanity. They can flourish only in an environment whose supreme values are honesty, equality, kindness, love and compassion. To create that environment is the prime objective of these proposals for political reform.

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