

## **Reinventing democracy**

Democracy in Canada is long over-due for an upgrade – particularly, how we elect our leaders

Radical Randy

Democracy. The very word conjures up the warm fuzzies. After all, what could be grander? Isn't it the reason we were in Afghanistan? Isn't it why America selflessly sacrifices itself by invading countries around the world? Too bad the word frequently turns out to be little more than an empty advertising slogan.

It would be a bit easier to believe the slogans if the U.S. didn't continue to back dictatorial regimes or if the Arab Spring hadn't been mercilessly crushed by its Saudi ally. When confronted with a tarnished, tired, glitter word that has become such a tool for the Right, it is useful to scrape the sparkles off and go back to the very underlying principles that give the word its power.

We might start a bit closer to home. The problem of our own lack of true democracy lies at the heart of our democratic deficit. Low voter turnout in Alberta and Canada is the subject of much hand wringing, as is the general political apathy of the populace, particularly among younger voters. Yet real discussion of the underlying causes is occasion for a strange

## **Beyond the ballot box**

Although we ostensibly live in a democracy, the reality is that average citizens have little input into the day-to-day running of our provincial or federal governments, which seem more concerned with the well-being of the corporations and the richest members of society than of the general population. Recent public outrage has focused on federal Conservative links to the robocall voter suppression scandal and various illegal campaign contributions or financing “irregularities” on the part of the Alberta or federal Conservatives. However, our democratic deficit relates to a structural problem that goes far beyond these brief headline-grabbing events.

A system that most fully expresses democratic ideals would involve serving the greater common good with beneficial social goals, while respecting individual rights. The most straightforward embodiment of this comes in the form of the much-maligned anarchism. Though cast by police, corporate media, and politicians as constituting random acts of destruction, real anarchism is perhaps the purest expression of the democratic ideal. Rather than a chaotic lack of rules, all decisions are made through consensus with all people present to represent themselves. Anyone not in agreement with a decision may stand aside or, if vehemently opposed, prevent the process from going forward until the issue is resolved. In practice, this ideal tends to bog down in groups of more than a few dozen. As a result some groups using consensus (such as an Occupy Wall Street

movement general assembly) may choose a vote with a high majority threshold to resolve an impasse.

This direct participation echoes the origins of democracy in ancient Athens. Although hardly a perfect system (women and slaves couldn't participate), decisions at its assembly were voted on by all citizens. The problems arise from scaling up from city-state to country. Even so, the fairest approach in any system would involve tacking as closely as possible to the consensus ideal, incorporating its elements whenever possible. If direct participation is no longer feasible, some form of representation by delegates is necessary and the complications begin.

### **The will of the people?**

The major obstacle to real democracy in Alberta and Canada, largely ignored in the mass media, is our first-past-the-post electoral system, in which a simple plurality is all that is required to win a seat. This effectively means that none of the votes cast for other parties or candidates, often constituting the majority of votes, count. With so many wasted votes it's hardly surprising citizens may not bother going through the motion of casting a ballot.

Not only do seats frequently go to candidates opposed by most of the riding's voters, but the same thing often happens to the government as a whole. Jean Chretien had majorities allowing him to ram controversial legislation such as NAFTA through Parliament even though he had only 40 per cent of the popular vote. A similar case now exists with the Harper government, following the 2011 Federal election. The party earned 40 per cent of the votes cast by the 61 per cent of the electorate who showed up at the polls. This gave the party the support of a mere quarter of all eligible voters, but a majority of seats in parliament. This has allowed Stephen Harper to ride rough-shod over Parliament, particularly during the 2012 omnibus budget, with its gratuitous inclusion of unrelated further attacks on environmental and social programs. Harper was able to force this through the House of Commons in spite of more than 800 opposition amendments, every one of which was voted down.

A similar situation exists at the provincial level. In the 2012 Alberta provincial election, Alison Redford's Progressive Conservatives won 71 per cent of the seats with only 44 per cent of the popular vote, continuing four decades of PC domination of the province, with their ongoing subservience to energy industry dictates. Meanwhile, opposition parties at both levels of government frequently wind up with fewer seats than their percentage of the popular vote would indicate.

This anachronistic system is also responsible for strategic voting by some of the electorate. Rather than simply choosing the candidate and party whose policies align with their own views, they may vote against a party they particularly abhor, casting their vote for a third candidate with a better chance. This may even lead to the possibility of two

parties agreeing to not run against each other in certain ridings to avoid vote splitting, increasing their total seat count at the expense of voter choice.

## **A demand for fairness**

In a system with a pretence to basic fairness, one would expect every vote to count, with the distribution of seats reflecting each party's share of the popular vote. Defenders of the status quo often argue that having MPs or MLAs selected solely by the proportion of votes, like in Israel, would deprive citizens of a representative elected in their riding to voice their concerns. However, this can be readily solved with mixed-member proportional representation, as recommended by the Law Commission of Canada. Under this system (used in many countries such as Germany and New Zealand), some of the representatives are elected directly in each riding, like the first-past-the-post manner, with the rest chosen from each party to provide a final mix proportional to the total vote. The MP or MLA for one's own riding may not necessarily be the candidate a citizen voted for, but at least they'll have a member representing their riding and the total party seat distribution will closely reflect the popular vote, with every vote counting.

It would be possible to give a further level of choice by having two separate ballots, one for their riding's candidate and one for the party. This would allow citizens the flexibility of voting for whichever candidate they wanted, regardless of party, while still giving a party seat distribution proportional to the electorate's votes. Additionally, the "proportionality" MPs could be selected from each province based on its party vote, serving as a provincial representative for their party in Parliament.

The standard objection concerns how the parties would choose the "unelected" members to fill out the proportional total. The danger voiced by detractors is that this could lead to a legislature or parliament filled with apparatchiks rewarded for toeing the party line - the list bogeyman. This could be countered by choosing the proportional members-at-large from candidates that were nominated for a riding, but not elected. Alternatively, parties could provide "open lists," allowing voters to choose which of a number of party potentials to support, rather than following a rigid pre-determined party ranking.

Some argue that proportional representation would result in deadlocked minority governments. The spurious nature of this objection may be seen when remembering Canada's parade of minority governments during the last decade under its current system. Additionally, many countries seem to function perfectly well with minority coalitions. Parties, not wanting to antagonize voters with too frequent elections, would have an incentive to work out differences. Some may fear the inclusion of fringe extremist parties in a proportional representation parliament, but any party that formed a coalition with an unsavoury partner would risk abandonment by its supporters in the next election. Further more, under our first-past-the-post system we already have a far-right Conservative federal government and Alberta's extremist Wild Rose official opposition. In spite of the objections, mixed member proportional representation would still represent a spectacular improvement over what we have now.

## **Power to the people...finally?**

The unwillingness of political leaders to embrace what should be an obvious escape from our democratic deficit quagmire is consistent with the larger goals of our ruling economic elites. Real democracy – *real* power to the people – is not conducive to the massively unequal society and corporate libertarianism that big business and the plutocrats crave. Historically, their struggle has always been the preservation of power, wealth, and privilege as the voting franchise expanded.

We are left with a hollowed out formal procedural democracy featuring little, if any, real citizen participation beyond their quadrennial ritual. Given our feeble democracy, it is hardly surprising that we increasingly see citizens taking to the streets as well as engaging in direct action to target wars, so-called “free trade” treaties and economic injustice. Canada's political structure vests an unusually large amount of power in the hands of the executive branch, more so than in British, American or most other democratic systems. As more and more power is concentrated in the Prime Minister's Office under Harper's majority, parliament becomes an increasingly irrelevant social club. The more useless the Canadian public perceives it to be, the less willing they are to make any effort to restore its power, a viscous downward spiral to autocratic rule. The hypothetical coalition governments that so disturb the mass media would be a democratizing element, preventing an absolutist Prime Minister from ruling by decree.

"It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." Winston Churchill's words have an unfortunate ring of truth. However, while democracy in the real world may be far from perfect, we can at least take the basic common sense move to proportional representation, ensuring that every vote counts, whether our rulers like it or not.

*For more information on this topic see [www.fairvote.ca](http://www.fairvote.ca) and [www.fairvotealberta.org](http://www.fairvotealberta.org)*