

Notes for an Address

**Fragmentation of the Spectrum:
The Decoupling of Political Governing Instruments
from Civil Society**

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It is often easy to blame institutions for things that do not go well in our society. The public discourse often embraces the largely unchallenged proposition that, whatever goes wrong, especially in matters of social policy, government institutions at some level or in some dimension are at fault. Parliament, we are told, spends insufficient time on social policy matters...or, we are assured, budgetary provisions are inadequate...or that the politics of our democracy afford insufficient voice to those truly in need. Rather than engage in tired polemic, I want to suggest that the sense of disconnect between street-level civil society challenges and concerns and the political process has other drivers which may be compellingly more serious.

As the paper I made available from the *Strengthening Canadian Democracy* series at the IRPP written in 2000 by Professor Richard Johnston of UBC makes clear,* we now have some deeply imbedded structural problems that seem to seriously prevent the re-appearance anytime soon of a competitive democratic framework within our electoral system.

What I mean by a competitive democratic framework is quite simple:

- A political reality where it is well within the realm of possibility that an incumbent government could face defeat by a challenging national party or group of parties at the coming election.
- A parliamentary reality where exposure to this quintessential democratic risk influences the normative give and take between different political parties and within political parties.

The absence of that competitive framework impacts civil society in a series of serious ways:

- The lack of democratic risk means the reality of one-party democracy. While Liberals deserve some congratulations for finding a way to have both the incumbent Prime Minister and the *de facto* Leader of the Opposition, namely Mr. Martin, in the same party, this only strengthens the stranglehold of one party-democracy on civil society, diminishing the relevance of the political spectrum.
- The incentive for volunteer groups, NGOs, public interest lobbies, both on the right and the left to, work with opposition parties to develop new policy initiatives is severely diminished if there is no chance that anyone but Liberals can form a government. In these times of difficult and challenging resource management by the volunteer sector, lobbying others becomes a questionable use of time and money hence the full spectrum of political views fails to find expression in policy development.
- The amount of good and competent people now active in civil society, in church, social service, community, business, labour and environmental groups who consider seeking a seat in Parliament in other than the governing party will be severely reduced. The imbalance of talent, ideas and people in favour of the governing incumbents will tilt even further.
- The prospect of severely distorted parliamentary results is enhanced, to the detriment of any incentive for voters to participate at all. If a 38% popular vote share produces a massive majority of seats because of five-way splits in some ridings, then the

unrepresentative nature of the electoral system is further exacerbated. If hundreds of thousands of voters can vote Green countrywide without producing a single seat, or if roughly five times as many voters are required to elect MPs from one party as opposed to another, the disincentives to voter participation are compelling.

- The tendency of our first-past-the-post system, designed for a two-party Westminster model, but now constraining a multi-party European-style reality in Canada, to manufacture majorities and regional blocks not actually desired by the voter, further creates a massive gap between existing social and demographic realities and the way they are given expression in the Parliament of Canada

Any time the concerns, aspirations, debates, disagreements, ideas and prospects of a broadly based, well rooted and pluralist civil society, especially one that embraces diversity and freedom as we hope to do in Canada is limited in its effective political expression, there are costs and consequences.

The absence of democratic risk clearly fuels those who argue for "diverse tactics" in street demonstrations in opposition to established domestic or international policies or bodies. While tolerating violence is beyond what civil societies should, in my view, allow, one need not be a crazed ideologue of the right or left to postulate that when a political system excludes any democratic risk for incumbent governments, taking to the streets or advancing extra-parliamentary opposition represent attractive propositions for some.

And, what is even more maddening within our present electoral system, it is both unrealistic and unfair to blame the incumbent administration for managing it competently to reduce its own political risks; it is not their job to help disorganized and somewhat disoriented opposition parties do better. If one opposition party chooses to have a leadership convention every two or three years, destroying its own capacity to build momentum or policy depth, if another is overwhelmed by internal feuding between organized labour and the rest of the rank and file, and if a third has not chosen to be associated with one compelling new idea for almost four years, that too is not the fault of the governing party.

If one assesses several of the analytical premises around the "Civil Society" theology of Putnam and Helliwell, cohesion, trust, choice and respect for diversity are important and critical parts of that theology. The role of government in that mix, the decisions it makes, the instruments it uses, the policies and programs it puts in place must, it follows, be rooted in the core civility of any "civil society." That is a civility that affords people choices, that links decisions made to democratic legitimacy, that is based on some measure of public participation and involvement in setting broad directions and goals. The absence of that democratic legitimacy weakens the authority of all institutions, diminishes the will to voluntary compliance and dilutes the sinews of civil society.

What politicians like John Diefenbaker, Bill Clinton, Pierre Trudeau, Margaret Thatcher, Brian Mulroney, Ronald Reagan, Tony Blair and Jean Chrétien have viscerally understood and practiced—despite their vast differences in policy and perspective, is the advancement and promotion of hope. Hope is more than just an aspirational part of the discourse of civil society; it is an essential ingredient in the positive mix that encourages volunteers, community leaders, business professionals and union and feminist organizers to work hard to achieve changes they feel will help

and strengthen society. If all hope of a government ever being changed by the voter is removed from the equation, then we are reducing in a measurable way one of the key change potential drivers of social and community optimism.

The collapsing turnout in Canadian federal elections may result from many different causes. I believe the first-past-the-post system is one cause—especially when young people and others know that unless they choose one of the two top parties in their riding, their vote will not count in any way relative to the formation of the next parliament. No doubt the sense that the election is over before it starts is another compelling disincentive to voting. The absence of a coherent nationally challenging party able in the public's mind to replace the incumbent also reduces turnout. I believe that the permanent list of voters as opposed to the traditional system of enumerators searching out voters also reduces participation, however unwittingly. I also recall an extremely predictive and insightful speech made by the Rt. Hon. Robert L Stanfield at the University of Victoria in 1975, where he argued that the growth of single-purpose, uncompromising special interest groups and lobbies would very much weaken parliamentary democracy and the political parties who are its servants.

But let's do the voter numbers for a moment. If a government is elected by 40% of a 61% turnout, we have a government for whom 24% of officially registered voters have cast their ballot. Is that a government, despite its best and most sincere efforts, which is able to represent the full spectrum of a broad and pluralist civil society? If one notes that historically younger and more economically disadvantaged voters tend to show up to vote far less than older and more affluent voters, the range of dislocation risks do and disconnect realities becomes even more apparent.

Now, let's look at Parliament itself. If, in an election with a 61% turnout (and I should point out here that if we tabulated our turnout the way our American neighbours did, our actual turnout would be more like 57%) elects many MPs with between thirty-five and forty-five percent of the vote in five-way riding fights, we could theoretically have a Parliament reflective of the votes of less than twenty-five percent of those Canadians who have the right to vote.

In good times, when the decisions faced by government or Parliament are non-controversial, this dislocation between the broader population and the election of a government or Parliament may not matter all that much. But when difficult decisions are required in areas like pension reform, health care, the war on terrorism, the management of our borders, immigration, and addressing the challenge of Aboriginal isolation and poverty, legitimacy from the ballot box is important.

Civil society can as a term mean different things to different people. In our political process, historically, it was given expression by two broad partisan traditions less defined by ideology and more about different views on issues more structural and institutional than ideological. Issues like the level of centralization or decentralization, conscription, the Imperial connection, reciprocity, military unification, the preferential tariff, language rights, nuclear warheads, dominated over questions that fit neatly in the right-left spectrum context. Large brokerage parties reflected not so much the right-left spectrum but the east-west, north-south, English and French-speaking, urban and rural, old stock and newer arrival distinctions that made up civil society over the years. Compromise and accommodation were their stock and trade. And the Canada we know today, with all its many successes and its manageable failures, was the product of that politics. Narrow spectrum politics played at the extremes is the refuge of those who have decided that

accommodation and compromise no longer matter—and are, in fact quite counterproductive. To embrace that view is to dilute the full scope and potential of a civil society that labours not to impose the ideological biases of a few on the many, but to shape a common social and civil purpose through a politics of accommodation and cohesion.

Today, as we sit here this afternoon, the intricate social policy pressures and exigencies that determine our priorities and myriad of equilibriums within the policy mix lack genuine opportunity for coherent political expression within a competitive multi-party democracy. Their absence from the political discourse is the true source of the fragmenting risk. Low participation democracies are open to manipulation by narrowly defined and well-financed economic and social forces with narrow agendas. Without the broad participation that establishes a countervailing democratic context within which narrow views must be broadened to survive, the prospects of serious distortions and problems increase markedly (at least our friends in France have run-off elections to allow quick repair of any excessive distortions). Put another way, with political party membership at an all-time low, and with voter participation also at an all-time low, the risk of a hijacking is more real and troubling. And the lack of any incentives to encourage participation, and, as the system no longer holds any real democratic risk for the incumbent only reduces the salience of the pluralism of our civil society at a time in our history when that salience has never mattered more.

If we reflect on periods of high voter turnout in the 1950s-1980s period, these were times when a strong sense of nation-building was in the air. Health insurance, the Canada Pension Plan, the Canadian Bill of Rights, the Trans-Canada Highway, post secondary education finance, enhanced income security, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement were symbols of a period of public and voter engagement. These, along with robust controversies like the pipeline debate, patriation, the new flag, the Meech Lake and Charlottetown Accords, spoke to periods in our history of engaged civil society and government always on the cusp of meaningful democratic risk.

Remove the risk and the level of engagement with government and the electoral process declines. Add to that the notion advanced extensively from almost all parts of the spectrum that the marketplace is a far more meaningful determinant of our collective and individual futures and prospects than the process of democratic politics, and one can begin to scope the range of decoupling pressures driving a wedge between the governed and those who govern.

When I wrote *Beyond Greed* in 1996, my core argument was that the extolling of wealth accumulation and the framework of atomistic personal-self interest that implied—when done so as an end in and of itself as opposed to a means to an end—would ultimately derail the right balance in the relationship between essentially constructive and creative business activity and society as a whole. My purpose then as it is now was to make the case that a civil society where equality of opportunity, freedom from fear in terms of catastrophic health costs, social mobility, enhanced literacy and reduced poverty was not a competitor with private-sector growth and expansion but a vital set of *conditions prealables* for private-sector opportunity.

My beef with the neo-conservatives in both countries was their exaltation of the private without due regard for the organic social linkages between private and public. Interestingly, neo-conservative electoral success in the United States has advanced as turnouts overall have gone down. One could argue the same case in parts of Canada. Certainly the superior use of voter identification,

fundraising and push polling techniques by the far right in America, including various evangelical groups, has been aided by low turnout figures overall—figures that have been as low as 50% in presidential elections and 39% in off-year congressional elections. If all one needs is 50% of 39% to elect a representative or senator, the bar is not set very high.

It should not be surprising that the ability of governments, in Canada or the US, or in the UK where turnout has also collapsed, seem largely impotent when addressing recent financial market challenges. They have become uncoupled from financial markets, even those over which they have regulatory responsibility, and, despite their best efforts, are also uncoupled from the majority of eligible voters who had no role whatever in their election. In how many other areas of vital societal importance are governments increasingly seen as essentially spectators as opposed to players? Human rights, child welfare, medical technology, pension performance, medical human resources, migration flows, business ethics? The eager embrace of the judicialization of government reflects both a public disconnect from the democratic process and in some respects a realization by the minimally elected that letting courts decide in difficult and controversial areas may have more credibility. Surely in all these and other areas, government's role would not be what we might have presumed in the post-war can-do nation-building period.

Don't get me wrong. My general bias is for a society where government knows its place, errs on the side of modesty as opposed to overreach and most of the driving forces for progress and change come from non-governmental parts of society like small business, the family, the community organization, universities and colleges, church and benevolent groups of all faiths. But a society where the role of government and the democratic political party is reduced to the role of self-interested bystander disengaged from the voting public and deemed essentially irrelevant to the needs and aspirations of civil society does not attract me. It is in fact a recipe for deeper fragmentation, not only of our politics but of our society overall.

The role of the political party (and Canadians have one of the lowest levels of political party membership of any country in the world) as a force for good, as an instrument for civil society to use for purposes of stability, consensus-building and progress, even for building common cause and direction with Canadians elsewhere, has diminished seriously in the post-war period. The electoral system plus a host of sins of omission and commission on the part of practitioners in all parties, along with the unadulterated ideology of *marketplace über alles* have all contributed to this problem.

In the same way as schools of business are hopefully now reviewing the absence of compliance, governance, regulatory, public policy and ethics courses in their curricula, those of us concerned about economic and social and public policy might well reflect on the importance of electoral dynamics and democratic participation to the quality, tolerance and legitimacy of various policy frameworks and prescriptions. The decoupling of civil society from the democratic and political process is not without consequence for us as well.

* Richard Johnston, "Canadian Elections at the Millennium," Institute for Research on Public Policy, *Choices*, Vol. 6, #6