

Government for the people, by the people

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No one would begrudge Bert Brown his upcoming appointment to the Senate. Twice elected by Albertans, his presence will, like his predecessor Stan Waters, hold symbolic and sentimental value. Then there are those polls telling us Canadians like the idea of having their senators elected even though many experts believe an elected Senate will undermine our Westminster system of responsible government.

It's a pity, really. In Canada, democratic legitimacy has become a cause celebre while her older, wiser sister, informed citizenship, languishes at the margins.

It wasn't always this way. In ancient Athens, for instance, laws were created by an assembly in which all citizens were eligible to participate following an agenda set by 500 other citizens whose names were drawn by lot. Elected officials were considered mere oligarchs and deliberations could take months or even a year.

Today, we have a slew of institutions and elected politicians to mediate between the citizen and the state with the result that we have never been more disengaged or cynical. An increasingly professionalized political class puts impression management ahead of meaningful policy development while our democratic institutions surrender to myriad varieties of self-selected squeaky wheels. Why would citizens engage on an issue when it won't make any difference?

Is there an antidote to this malaise?

Enter deliberative democracy. Following Keith Spicer's Citizens' Forum on Canada's Future in 1991 and the inclusion of ordinary Canadians in the constitutional conferences leading to the Charlottetown Accord in 1992, steps toward a more participatory and deliberative form of democracy have been quietly under way. These include independent groups like Calgary's Citizens' Centre for Freedom and Democracy, but the most promising in terms of policy as well as constitutional development are the government-organized citizens' assemblies and public consultations that have proliferated across the country. An assembly has just proposed a new electoral system for Ontario while the federal government has launched public consultations on democratic reform.

The term deliberative democracy was coined in 1980 by an American professor of government and ethics, Joseph M. Bessett. But it is a political theorist, now head of Stanford University's Center for Deliberative Democracy, who brought the concept to fruition.

In 1987, James A. Fishkin decided that the manner in which early U.S. primaries set the trend for the rest of the race -- the "lemming" effect -- was hardly appropriate for a democracy. The Athenian example where citizens acquired "both a spur and a stake" in the system would then prove germane to his concept of deliberative polling.

Using a scientifically verifiable representative sample of citizens who gathered over extended periods of time to hear arguments, discuss and then vote on an issue, Prof. Fishkin met the requirements of both political equality (everyone has an equal chance of having his name drawn) and deliberation. "Ordinary polls represent what the public is thinking when it is not paying too much attention. Deliberative polls represent what the public would think if they became seriously engaged ...," he told Re-public journal last September.

Several books and many deliberative polls later, including those with PBS and the Britain's Channel 4, a new democratic institution has taken hold.

So has the inevitable criticism: Attempting to manipulate the outcome, the failure to balance or even to provide competing experts, the legitimacy of the sample, questions about any organizer's capacity for neutrality ... all invalidate the process. Moreover, writes Richard Posner, a lecturer at the University of Chicago law school, most people "have no interest in debate. That interest resides in the articulate class. Rights are seized, they are not bestowed by average citizens enticed into deliberative enclaves ..."

Prof. Fishkin concedes the limitations, but he tells me deliberative democracy isn't about supplanting representative democracy, it is about supplementing it. "Democracy adapted to the large-scale nation state during the 18th century through representative government," he said. "Today, democratic reform is usually discussed in terms of elites and masses, but an informed microcosm of the public is possible through deliberative processes."

Margret Kopala's column on western perspectives appears every other week.

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