
Canada Today: A Democratic Audit

by William Cross

Much has been written in recent years concerning a 'democratic deficit' and 'democratic malaise' in Canada. There is substantial evidence that many Canadians are dissatisfied with the state of our democratic practices and institutions. At the same time, new phenomena such as increased pressures of globalization and changing communications technologies pose new challenges to Canadian democracy. To consider these issues, the Centre for Canadian Studies at Mount Allison University has launched a major research project entitled Canada Today: A Democratic Audit. Under the auspices of this project, a team of prominent political scientists from across the country will conduct the 21st century's first, wide-ranging examination of democracy in Canada. This article looks at the project.

The final decade of the last century began with forceful representations of Canadians' dissatisfaction with their political processes and institutions at the hearings of the *Citizens' Forum on Canada's Future*. The following passage from the Forum's final report summarizes the sentiments many Canadians' expressed:

One of the strongest messages the forum received from participants was that they have lost their faith in both the political process and their political leaders. They do not feel that their governments, especially at the federal level, reflect the will of the people, and they do not feel that citizens have the means at the moment to correct this.¹

These findings were echoed in the 1991 report of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing which found that "many Canadians are critical of their existing political institutions. Many are concerned that these institutions are not sufficiently responsive to their views and interests."² Public opinion survey data confirm that at the outset of the new century large numbers of Canadians continue to believe their politicians and political institutions are out of touch and unresponsive, and are increasingly dissatisfied with the

performance of parliament and political parties.³ Consistent with these attitudes, voter participation in federal election campaigns has dropped substantially in recent elections, reaching a record low in 2001. And, as evidenced in Quebec City by the protests of the tens of thousands of Canadians who took to the streets, many continue to believe that public decision making is secretive, dominated by a small group of elites and unresponsive to the citizenry.

The last decade has also seen voters turn away from a pattern of electoral competition that has dominated federal politics for more than a century. In the 1993 election the governing Progressive Conservatives were reduced to just two seats in the House of Commons as two new parties, the Bloc Québécois and Reform, enjoyed remarkable successes. Many have suggested that the 1993 election result represented more than a repudiation of the governing Progressive Conservative party. It was in part a product of widespread voter dissatisfaction with the state of Canadian democracy.⁴ Today, the party system remains in a state of uncertainty, with the result being that there is no credible, single alternative government to the Liberals.

These findings notwithstanding, any fair observer must conclude that not all is lost in Canadian democracy. Canada continues to be the envy of much of the rest of the world. A relatively wealthy and peaceful society, Cana-

William Cross is Director of the Centre for Canadian Studies at Mount Allison University in New Brunswick.

dians hold regular elections in which millions cast ballots. These elections result in the selection of a government with no question about its legitimate right to govern. Canada routinely ranks at or very near the top of the United Nations Human Development Index, and tens of thousands from around the world apply each year to move to and live in Canada. Developing democracies from around the globe routinely look to Canada for guidance in the establishment of new democratic practices and institutions.

Given all of this it is time to examine the state of Canadian democracy and to consider where it is working well, where it is falling short, what the possibilities for reform are, and how it can be improved. Hence the idea of a democratic audit.⁵

The term audit is, of course, most often associated with the accounting and financial worlds. The accountant uses established and accepted measures to ascertain adherence with standard financial principles. A democratic audit is more than this. In defining our purposes, we begin with the notion of an organizational audit which the *Encyclopedia of Banking and Finance* defines as: "a systematic review of an organization's activities for assessing performance, identifying opportunities and developing recommendations for improvement."⁶ We add to this what the Oxford English Dictionary calls an older meaning of listening and hearing. Together these two definitions provide a working definition of the term audit for the *Canada Today: A Democratic Audit* project. Thus, our purposes are to examine the way Canadian democracy functions, to listen to what others have to say about the operation of Canadian democracy, to assess its strengths and weaknesses, to consider where there are opportunities for advancement, and to evaluate potential reforms.

A democratic audit requires the setting of benchmarks for evaluation of the practices and institutions considered. This necessarily entails substantial consideration of the meaning of democracy. Democracy is obviously a contested term and we are not interested here in striking a definitive definition. Nor are we interested in a theoretical model applicable to all parts of the world. Rather we are interested in democratic benchmarks that are relevant to Canada at the outset of the 21st Century. In selecting these we were guided by the issues raised in the current literature on Canadian democratic practice and by the concerns about Canadian democracy commonly raised by opinion leaders and found in public opinion data. Ultimately, we settled on three benchmarks: public participation, inclusiveness, and responsiveness. We believe that any contemporary definition of Canadian democracy must include public institutions and decision making practices that are defined by public participation, that this participation must be inclusive of all Cana-

dians, and that government outcomes must be responsive to the views of Canadians. This is obviously not an exhaustive list of democratic benchmarks. There are other important considerations. Nonetheless, for purposes of this project we are concentrating on these three which we believe are particularly relevant to the current discourse about the state of democracy in Canada.⁷

While settling on these guiding principles, we are not imposing a strict set of democratic criteria on all of the evaluations that together constitute the audit. Rather, our approach allows each 'auditor' wide latitude in his/her evaluation. While each auditor is keeping the benchmarks of public participation, inclusiveness and responsiveness, central to their examination, each is free to add additional criteria that he or she thinks particularly important to the area of democracy they are examining. In this sense we differ from a financial audit and from the Swedish project where the audit organizers have drawn up a checklist of a dozen or so democratic qualities that are assessed in each part of the audit. We rejected this approach for several reasons. First, it requires that the number of individuals making the final assessments remain very small to ensure uniformity in the application of the standards. Second, the findings of the audit would be largely dependent on the list of criteria established at the outset, which is problematic because the selection of the democratic criteria is not an objective task. Rather it is a highly subjective exercise and thus it is likely that different organizers would compile different lists. Essentially, we rejected this approach because we do not want the normative views of the organizing committee to determine the outcome.

Ultimately, we decided on an approach that takes us somewhat away from the traditional notion of what an audit is. We are using a rather large team of auditors – more than a dozen. Each of whom is examining and assessing a discrete area of Canadian democracy. While all of the team members have agreed to use the three established benchmarks, each is free to include other democratic criteria believed to be important to his or her investigation. The auditors are also considering other values, such as the Canadian tradition of brokerage and accommodative politics that might support restrictions on contemporary notions of popular democracy.

Essentially, we have asked our auditors to consider how the area of democracy they are examining measures up to the democratic norms and expectations extant in Canada at the start of the new century. While this does mean that there will not be absolute uniformity in the measurements used throughout the audit we believe this adds to the value of the project. Democracy is an inherently normative concept and imposing a single, limited set of criteria throughout the audit and having a small

group make the assessments would not capture the depth and breadth of the debate surrounding democratic practices nor would it capture the robustness made possible by engaging more than a dozen of the country's political scientists in the project.

While providing each auditor with substantial freedom it is important to note that the auditors are all working as part of a team. The entire team is gathering at several points during the project allowing us to collectively consider the issues that are defining and shaping the audit. This approach allows us to benefit from the group's collective wisdom (something too infrequently done in academe) and to ensure coherency throughout the project.

The next crucial question in constructing a Canadian democratic audit is deciding upon the subjects to tackle. We decided at the outset to cover substantial ground in a short period of time. From start to finish this is a three-year project – a relatively short period compared with the much longer Swedish and UK audits. We also decided that each subject should be dealt with in some length and so have opted for book-length manuscripts on each of the subject areas being examined. These considerations necessarily narrow the scope of the audit and require some hard choices concerning what to include and what to leave out. In making this decision we are guided by the agreed upon democratic benchmarks. Public participation, inclusiveness and responsiveness seem particularly appropriate measures for study of public institutions and electoral practices. In considering the arguments raised by many of those who have been most critical of Canadian democracy over the course of the last decade and considering the findings of public opinion pollsters, we are convinced that a good deal of the concerns regarding Canadian democracy relate to the processes of public decision making: who makes the decisions? what opportunities do average Canadians have to influence these decisions? who sets the public agenda? Accordingly, the audit is focusing on public institutions, electoral practices and new phenomena that will potentially have significant affect on public decision making in Canada. Some would argue that economic and social justice issues should be included, others that there must be a robust consideration of individual rights and liberties and they are not wrong. Our examination is not exhaustive. Indeed, Canadian democracy is a vibrant force the status of which can never be fully captured at one time. Nonetheless, the areas we are considering are inclusive of many of the pressing issues currently facing Canadian democracy. We do not expect to have the final word on this topic, but rather hope to encourage others to pursue similar avenues of enquiry.

The Canadian democratic audit includes examinations of several key decision making bodies: legislatures, the courts, and cabinets and governments. While the focus is at the federal level, we acknowledge that many Canadians primarily deal with provincial and local governments and wherever appropriate attention is paid to these levels of government. The structures of our governing and electoral systems are also important to the nature of our democracy and so the audit includes studies devoted to federalism and to our electoral system. The ways in which citizens participate in electoral politics and policy making is a key component of the project and thus we include studies of interest groups, social movements and political parties. The desire and capacity of Canadians for meaningful participation in public life is also examined. Finally, two new phenomena that raise important challenges to the practice of democracy are investigated: globalization and new communications technologies.

The audit does not include studies devoted to the status of particular groups of Canadians. Rather than separate out Aboriginals, women, new Canadians, and others, these groups are treated together with all Canadians throughout the audit. For example, the studies on courts, federalism, governments and the electoral system all examine questions of particular relevance to the status of Aboriginal Canadians. They do so, however, within the context of their overall study and not as part of a separate investigation into the status of various constituent groups of Canadians.

At the end of this project we expect to have produced ten volumes examining specific areas of Canadian democratic life. As well, we are planning a synthetic, concluding volume that will provide an overall assessment and make sense out of the different approaches and findings found in the individual volumes.⁸ While we do hope to shed light on how various aspects of Canadian democracy are performing, and to consider possibilities for reform, our principle goal is not to issue a report card on the status of our democracy. Rather we hope to add to and encourage on-going discussion about how best to fashion Canada's democratic institutions and practices well into the new Century.

Notes

1. *Citizens' Forum on Canada's Future: Report to the People and Government of Canada* (Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1991), 135.
2. *Report of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing*, volume 2, (Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1991), 229.