Failing Legitimacy: The Challenge for Parliamentarians

by Hugh Segal

The parliamentary process in Canada is facing pressures that threaten our democratic system itself. Voter turnout is at an all time low in peacetime. This article looks at some of the reasons for our apparent disaffection with politics.

We are living in a period of serious "democratic compression". By that I mean the space between decisions made by government and the individual or collective concerns of citizens is seen to be too large, the distance too great. There is pressure to reduce that space. The role of delegated intermediaries, whether in the financial world or the democratic political world is seen as dispensable in some measure, because of the potential role of technology.

The notion advanced is that just as technology and digital communications allows people around the world to connect more readily and at lower cost than ever before, both financially and in terms of so called "real time", so too can technology facilitate a more direct democracy where citizens can be consulted directly by government without the need to have their views "translated" or "mediated" by elected parliamentarians.

In research done by Dr. Paul Howe of the IRPP as part of our "Strengthening Canadian Democracy" research series in 2000, the views of Canadians with respect to the electoral process indicated a general approval of how the system worked, but, as one approached the issue of electoral participation – i.e. voting and political party membership, the level of perceived benefit and utility falls off noticeably. Less than 2% of Canadians have even held a party card of any kind. In the last election, the largest group of eligible voter chose not to vote at all.

If we count the Canadian way, i.e. comparing the amount who voted to the permanent list, close to 62% voted – an all time low. If we count the way our American cousins do, i.e. those who voted compared to those who had the right to vote, we had barely a 57% turnout. There is no reason for Canadians to feel superior to our American neighbours and their 50% or so turnout in Presidential elections.

Especially among young people, this does not reflect a diminished interest in public affairs, or issues of public concerns. It reflects instead a broad belief that political party activity and/or voting are not among the most effective ways of achieving change, improving living standards, promoting a cleaner environment or fighting poverty, high taxes or illiteracy.

Joining and supporting uni-focus lobby and advocacy groups, or volunteer community groups, like the Sierra Fund, The Red Cross, Greenpeace, The Taxpayers' Federation, etc., are seen to be more effective and impactful on public life and real life outcomes.

To the credit of young Canadians, and in this regard they have company around the world, the messages that the marketplace is at least as important as the political arena, or that the real problems and challenges of this larger world are less about political parties and voting, and more about international citizen efforts in support of AIDS prevention, economic and social opportunity, environmental integrity, and the like, have clearly had impact. Domestic parliaments and the parties competing

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for local elections often take more parochial views on these issues.

Part of the challenge faced here by parliamentarians is that the parliamentary system, while very much tied to the government versus opposition adversarial dialectic also implies within the caucus of the various political parties an ongoing and dynamic process of compromise. These compromises exist for very important reasons – to reconcile different regional interests, to address views that divide urban from rural, left from right, labour from capital, public from private sector. These compromises constitute the essence of democratic political parties which seek to broaden their tents to include as many of their fellow citizens as possible. Yet this very compromise process, wherein environmental interests may be reconciled with industrial concerns, or military priorities are softened by social program exigencies all conspire to encourage those who care passionately about a particular issue to avoid that part of the political process, that is self propelled on compromise.

For the elected parliamentarian, whether in a first past the post single member constituency system or in a proportional representation public list system, or a hybrid of the two, the legitimacy challenge here is quite real.

> *Governments elected with 40% of a turnout of 61% or with 24% of the eligible voters, contribute to an uninspiring disconnect between the formal processes of our parliamentary democracy and the day to day aspirations of the people.*

While it may initially strike us as strange that a young person may feel more comfortable getting her information via the navigation of a foreign NGA website, or that of a local advocacy group than addressing or visiting their local member of parliament's office, we would be utterly disconnected from the biases of modern culture and the criticisms of the political process now endemic to that culture not to understand why.

Parliamentary government is about process and procedures that are fair, afford time for debate, result from bureaucratic deliberations and the deliberations of caucuses and cabinets. Life is about real time – with real time results. Suggesting months and years in the context of a legislature process on an issue, when problems are here and now is a critical disconnect for not just our youngest citizens.

The advent of information technology and the hyper-charged world of defined purpose lobby groups are not disconnected. The successful deflection of the Multilateral Investment Agreement was very much the result of groups from around the world using cyber-culture technology to link up and cause the states actively involved in the negotiations serious pause. The motivation of large multinational groups of protesters at various locations, Seattle, Quebec City, Genoa, and elsewhere reflects a similar coming together of anti-globalization and information technology culture.

Taking Democracy to the People

What are the positive opportunities this process of "technological disintermediation" presents for the parliamentary process?

It is wholly understandable that a passion for parliament and its historic role in our societies makes innovation hard – as does the competitive context between the political parties present in parliament. But more model parliaments that take place in high schools and youth centres, cyber-parliaments where websites allow citizens to research parliamentary debates, committee discussions in consumer friendly ways would all help breakdown misconceptions and cultural biases about the parliamentary system. These projects should be undertaken by parliaments, speakers of the House and support organizations of their own accord. Grass roots support for parliamentary democracy is about building and sustaining the parliamentary brand. This should not be left to happenstance or volunteer efforts.

Fundraising reform, which always is a sensitive question in every democracy, is nevertheless quite fundamental to the perception of the process. And when circumstances conspire to make those perceptions situationally quite negative, the centre of any particular alleged scandal is not the only one negatively impacted. All those in the system pay a price every time the relationship of money to the public policy process is deemed to be undue in terms of influence.

Reforms made that are not scandal driven have the distinct possibility of getting ahead of the curve in terms of public cynicism.

The voting process must also be brought into the 21st century although I do not necessarily mean the use of computers or various 'Rube Goldberg voting machines' – innovations which may well fail the comprehension or security test essential to modern democracy. Paper and pencils work just fine. But where people vote, over what period, what rules pertain to absentee ballots, the handicapped and the preparation of the voters list all conspire

to either invite or, however unwittingly, discourage participation. If parliamentary democracy were a business, which it is not, or even a community service organization, which it should be, and it had growing challenges in terms of public interest and popular legitimacy, parliamentarians would be actively engaged in assessing the impediments to public engagement and positive interest in support of their market share in the fight for the hears and minds of their voters. This is not just about why voting and the parliamentary process is important. It is also about what the risks are when people do not participate – outcomes reflective of small minorities, parliaments disconnected from the views of entire segments of the public.

> *Governments come and governments go, but the institution of parliament is one of those frameworks that must endure, and must never be taken for granted.*

Many globe spanning organizations – NATO, the UN, The Red Cross, have done some of the work vital to sustaining public understanding of their purposes and goals via free standing citizen organizations – such as the United Nations Associations across the world or The Atlantic Council throughout the NATO countries. It may be very useful for a commonwealth wide Citizen's Organization for Parliamentary Democracy, with strong local chapters, devoted to promotion and awareness around the benefits of parliamentary government to come into being. It would, by definition be non partisan and related constructively to the work you do. It could well take on the popularisation of the parliamentary approach and the promotion of dialogue, debate and engagement about parliament at all strata of society.

Conclusion

When I worked in government both at the provincial and federal level, I was always impressed by the various new points of reference all submissions to Cabinet had to address. How well did a proposed measure impact women's rights, or the handicapped, or small business, or potential trade rules, or federal provincial relations, or foreign policy.

We should, perhaps be seeking new point of reference – how does any measure proposed, impact the health and vitality of parliamentary democracy, as a protector of both the democratic will of the plurality or majority, and the legitimate rights of all those who voted against the government of the day?

We fail to ask that question at our collective peril. Parliamentarians are the elected essence of a pluralist democratic institution that reflects or ought to reflect the full breadth of the society they serve. Citizens who are democrats look to parliament as the crucible of national debate, legitimate and strongly held opinions and the framework for national reconciliation wherever possible.

It is a human institution seeking through the hard work of its members to serve the genuine interests of citizens throughout the realm. It deserves not to atrophy to the point of irrelevance.

And those who care about parliamentary democracy need to be nimble in our response to those who would dilute its relevance or circumvent its vital importance.

For those who prefer a "clickstream of digital data" on an issue, we should insist that parliamentary debates are cross referenced, indexed by subject, time and speaker, and be available on independent and universal search engines, in many languages. For those who prefer NGO's and the cyber debate, we must constantly array the positive interaction between NGO's and parliamentary committees in support of well informed and timely parliamentary action. For those who decry all partisanship as self centered and corrupt, we must make the case for the vital role of all political parties in making collective action and political participation real. And for those who opt for "disintermediation" by diluting or diminishing the parliamentary process, we should make the case for the public forum. Parliament is where different views are out in the open for all to see.

Not everyone in business, bureaucratic, academic, or community sectors cares deeply about this risk of atrophy, or have even reflected on the costs to civil society should that transpire. That is precisely the reason that those who do care about the promise and prospects of parliamentary democracy must.