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# Celebrating 250 Years of Representative Government in Nova Scotia

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by Hon. John Hamm

*Democracy 250 is a non-profit, non-partisan body created by an Act of the Nova Scotia Legislature with the unanimous support of all parties to plan celebrations marking the 250th anniversary of the first representative government in Nova Scotia and Canada's first parliamentary democracy. This article looks at how and why Nova Scotia is marking the event.*

When Canada's first parliamentary assembly met on October 2, 1758 in a small wooden building in Halifax it was a modest beginning to Canadian democracy. The first elected assembly consisted of 19 men – all white, all Protestant, all property owners. The significance of the event was captured in a 1912 editorial in the *Times* of London. "The Nova Scotia Assembly was the beginning of that great development which has given us the free nations of the Commonwealth." And as Author Archibald MacMechen wrote "View it in whatever light you will – that meeting of 19 men was a memorable event. It meant the planting of free political institutions in what is now Canada."

It was democracy in its infancy. Something that would grow and evolve into something much bigger as Nova Scotia later adopted responsible government and freedom of the press, two hallmarks of modern democracy and two more proud firsts for Nova Scotia.

We were also the first province in Canada to establish a Supreme Court. In fact, we established the first Supreme Court in North America. So the four pillars of Canadian freedom, the executive and legislative branches of government, the judiciary and freedom of the press were all Nova Scotia firsts. Nova Scotia is THE place in Canada that shaped the course of Canadian democracy.

We mark the anniversary of representative government with a celebration every 50 years. Let me read what Lieutenant Governor Fraser wrote on the 150th anniversary.

Here first in the great Kingdom now forming the homeland and beyond the seas men met to deliberate as a parliament on questions affecting the land in which they lived. Not, it is true, with the same power, freedom and responsibility as now, but still a meeting of free men representing free men. That they and all who came after them played their parts honourably, unselfishly and patriotically till the fullest responsible government became ours, none will now deny. In the future our children, our grandchildren, will certainly again celebrate this great epoch in our history.

Just as Lieutenant Governor Fraser predicted we are once again celebrating this important milestone in our nation's history.

Is it necessary to celebrate democracy? I think so and so do many others. As Joseph Howe, a proud Nova Scotian, great Canadian and father of the free press in Canada once said "....a wise nation preserves its records, gathers up its muniments, decorates the tombs of its illustrious dead, repairs its great public structures and fosters national pride and love of country by perpetual reference to the sacrifices and glories of the past."

Beyond simply recognizing a significant national milestone, there is another important reason for celebrating democracy. We need to remind ourselves, and young people in particular, that democracy is important – that

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*Dr. John Hamm is a former Premier of Nova Scotia and Co-chair of Democracy 250. This is a revised version of an address to the Manning Centre for Building Democracy on March 1, 2008.*

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voting and civic engagement are important – and that together they are at the core of our Canadian freedoms?

Why do we need to remind Canadians of something so obvious? Because the numbers tell us we should. Voter participation in national, provincial and municipal general elections has been on a steady decline since our soldiers returned home after World War II. Look at voter turnout in the most recent Ontario general election. Even though the pundits had predicted a close race – barely 50 percent of eligible voters turned out at the polls. In a recent by-election in my home province the newspapers were happily reporting that there was a 44 percent turnout. And in a recent municipal council by-election – again in Nova Scotia – less than 12 percent of voters turned out in an election with four candidates vying for the job.

When you think about these numbers, you get an appreciation for how few people actually determine who will represent them and who will speak for all others.

Statistics show and studies conclude that the main reason for this is young people are shunning the ballot box in huge numbers. In fact, in most elections, there is less than a 25 percent turnout rate for youth under 25. In the last federal election more than 1.2 million young Canadians between the ages of 18 to 25 years of age did not vote.

***I have no doubt that young people cherish their freedoms as much as anyone else. And I have no doubt they believe in free enterprise and are grateful for the rule of law which protects all of us.***

What is puzzling – as well as troubling – is that while I know today's youth care deeply about the issues – issues such as the environment, education, human rights, social justice, poverty – more and more of them are choosing not to exercise the one right that guarantees all others the right to vote. Many are not connecting all they have with democracy.

Instead they use other means to make their political views known – purchasing power being one example. Youth have no hesitation in expressing themselves practically every day on the internet, through You-tube, blogs and on Facebook. They know what they believe in and, perhaps more so than any other generation before them, express it freely – yet they are still not voting. So what is the answer? How do we stop or reverse declining youth participation?

Democracy 250 believes it starts with getting more young people actively involved in their communities. And when more people get involved...when more people vote...the stronger our democracy will be – the stronger our province and country will be. Two Hundred and Fifty years ago, Nova Scotia won the right to shape its destiny and with that victory we helped shape the destiny of others.

Freedom exists here because Canadians believe in democracy. We believe in the power and potential of every individual to use their talents, strengths and abilities in a way that will make things better for everyone.

I do not think anyone better described what it means to be a Canadian with the power of the vote than John George Diefenbaker. Mr. Diefenbaker said this in the House of Commons on July 1st, 1960 – the day the bill was tabled to establish the *Bill of Rights*.

I am a Canadian. A free Canadian. Free to speak without fear. Free to worship God in my own way. Free to stand for what I think is right. Free to choose those who shall govern my country.

I wonder what Mr. Diefenbaker would think about the state of democracy in Canada today. I am sure he would agree that by most standards it is strong. I also think that by past standards it is showing signs of distress. It is showing us that voter turnout is at an all time low and voter apathy and cynicism at an all time high. And it is showing us that in the grand comfort of a great country where no one is dropping bombs on us and where free enterprise abounds, the rule of law prevails and individual freedoms are protected – we might be taking things for granted.

Democracy, free enterprise and all of the other freedoms it provides us do not exist by decree. They take the interest and active engagement of all of our citizens. And when you consider how easy it is to participate in the voting process in our country and compare it to elsewhere, it makes you wonder why so many Canadians do not vote. We get the morning paper delivered to our door. We can turn on the evening news or log on to the internet to get the latest political news. Freedom of the press allows us to be informed. And it takes just minutes to vote.

A former colleague of mine recently told me that he went to Africa to monitor elections in a country that almost 250 years after we had the right to vote was just introduced to democracy. He spoke of a woman who stood with her four small children in the blazing sun for hours on end just to get the chance to vote.

It is an image that brings to my mind just how fortunate and grateful I am to live in a country where voting is easy and where the power of every man and woman's

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vote carries the same weight. As a former politician I also know and understand that there is a lot of public distrust and cynicism when it comes to politics and politicians. Many believe that voting does not matter and that politics is a waste of time and that all politicians are in it for themselves.

Politics is not easy. There are far more demands than there are dollars to meet them. Far more complex issues than there are easy answers to fix them. But, by and large, my experience has been the vast majority of those who enter public life do so with the best interests of others at heart and most do the best they can. Democracy is not always pretty and it is usually quite slow, but over time, it gets the job done.

Cynicism, distrust and apathy are poor excuses for not voting. If we do not trust, like or agree with our MP, MLA or municipal councillor – the vote is ours to change things for the better. Rest assured, the lobbyists will vote, the special interest groups will vote and the political partisans will vote. The future of our country should not and must not be left to them and them alone. It should rest with all of us collectively, rich, poor, black, white, Christian, Muslim or Jew, gay, straight, old and young.

As Aristotle said, democracy will work better when more people work for democracy. That is why beyond the celebrations – beyond the fireworks and the floats – beyond the concerts and ceilidhs we are planning for the year ahead, Democracy 250 wants to reach out and re-engage young Canadians in the democratic process.

In March we launched a youth campaign called *D250: Make Your Mark*. Recently we held the first of eight youth town hall meetings where high school students gathered to participate in a mock election and to discuss issues of concern to youth.

We wanted to remind them that our freedoms, and the freedoms they enjoy today, came at great cost. That their grandfathers and grandmothers, great grandfathers and great grandmothers, made too often the ultimate sacrifice for them to live in a country that embraces the freedoms that so many others in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kenya, Iran and Iraq are fighting for and dying for.

We want to remind them that even now their fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, aunts and uncles are putting their lives at risk to secure the freedoms of others and to make our world and country safer.

And we want to remind them that if they want to change things for the better for their generation they need to stand up and speak out on election day, even better, become actively involved in the political process.

It will not be easy. I certainly do not expect to see things turn around over night. But hopefully through this spe-

cial anniversary year with its focus on democracy we can start something in our province that – just as we did 250 years ago – will evolve into something much bigger.

Can we stop or reverse declining voter participation? I think so, but not without help. It will take the efforts of many. It will take hard work on the part of today's parents, teachers, politicians, community, business and religious leaders. It will take the enthusiastic support of young Canadians, and there are many who agree that voter apathy cannot be allowed to erode, pick away at or undermine the democratic freedoms that our forefathers established and that our veterans stood firm to protect.

To that end, I hope that all politicians do their part to help out. Many of you are parents – most of you are brothers or sisters, aunts or uncles to someone younger whom you can sit down with and talk about politics. The benefits, according to a recent article in the journal *PS: Political Science and Politics* published by the American Political Science Association stated:

Evidence suggesting that the growth of civic roots in adolescence may be crucial to the long-term development of citizenship has stimulated research into factors that might influence civic development during this time. One interesting finding to emerge from that exploration is the apparent importance of discussion to the development of civic competence. Adolescents who discuss politics with their parents, peers, or teachers tend to score higher than other youth on measures of civic behaviour, attitude and skills. They develop higher levels of political knowledge, show greater intention to vote in the future and do better on a range of civic outcomes...

Positively impacting voter turnout, particularly among youth will take more than fireworks and floats during a special year of celebration. It will take more than speeches from former politicians. It will take everyone to sit down with at least one young person and remind them of all that they have, all that has been sacrificed and all that needs to be protected. Let me close with a quote from another former Prime Minister and a proud Nova Scotian – Sir Robert Borden, who 80 years ago, reflected on our country.

Let us never forget the solemn truth that the nation is not constituted of the living alone. There are those as well who have passed away and those yet to be born. So this great responsibility comes to us as heirs of the past and trustees of the future. But with that responsibility there has come something greater still. The responsibility of proving ourselves worthy of it: and I pray that this may not be lost.

I share his sentiments. I hope others do as well.