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A Parliamentary Democracy

GOVERNMENT IS THE VASTEST of all human enterprises, and it needs to be constantly examined to see that it is functioning well. It is the organization through which the state manifests its will, issues its commands, and conducts its affairs. The state is given that power by the will of the people of Canada, expressed through the vote of a free, unfettered, secret ballot.

People vote for the same reasons as they form or join or support groups that are seeking to bring about social or community improvement: they wish to have a hand in promoting welfare; they want to be part of life.

When a voter touches pencil to paper in casting his ballot he is reminded that he is not living alone. He is one of the whole community, sharing at this moment in choosing the persons who shall carry out his wishes in the government of the nation.

Twenty-five years ago, when Canada was embarking on the crucial post-war years, this bank sent out slips to readers of its Monthly Letter. They read:

"This is a year when Canadians exercise one of the greatest privileges of Democracy — the right to vote. The men we choose will be our constitutional leaders in domestic and foreign affairs. Great responsibility will rest upon them. But their responsibility is first of all our responsibility, because we choose them. Democracy is a form of government for free and upright people who take pride in governing themselves, and who do govern themselves."

Democracy is defined as a system of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them or by their elected agents under a free electoral system. The essence of democracy is that consent is free after free debate.

The principle that what concerns all must be approved by all is impossible of attainment, because, human nature being as it is, there will always be a dissenting minority.

Freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of assemblage and secret choice of representatives are all part of the fabric of democracy. Parliamentary democratic government is direction of the affairs of

the state by a majority that provides the minority with the possibility of becoming a majority by the education of citizens to its point of view.

In Canada's parliamentary democracy every citizen is faced by a sovereign responsibility: that of directing his own fate. Through their selected government, men and women find it possible to establish themselves in mutually fulfilling relationship to their fellow citizens, and that is the central function of happy human life.

The town meeting

The only way in which a person can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject affecting him is by hearing what can be said about it by people of every variety of opinion. Since earliest times, men and women have been trying to create a system that will give them this opportunity to learn about things.

In Greece of the sixth to the fourth century B.C. every citizen had the right to attend and speak and vote in the assembly. Since then, there have been many plans devised to preserve the ideal of government by citizens who meet face to face to discuss their problems. It is difficult indeed to adapt a form of government that was developed in simple, intimate, community life to an era of great nation states, large and centralized organization, and highly specialized knowledge.

The town meeting was such an effort. It was a general meeting of the inhabitants of a town in which they were able to make their voices heard. They were recognized as persons, and not as faceless cogs in a machine. Such pure democracy, person-to-person discussion and decision, would be impossible in a nation, province, or city, hence representative democracy has developed.

It is not by chance, but by enlightened development, that government in Canada provides what people all over the world desire: a liberal environment; a fluid society free from class barriers; opportunity to choose and to progress in profession or trade according to one's ambition, ability and energy; liberty to stand up and speak out for things in which one believes; and

the power to choose those who are to have the authority to maintain these freedoms.

Canadians have confidence that their aspirations can be met within this system. Many other nations have democratic constitutions that are as perfect as Canada's, but Canada has added an ingredient: she has given a valuable demonstration that tolerance must be an intrinsic part of any real democracy.

Obviously, the government cannot be looked upon as an institution that acts in a Santa Claus way, handing out goodies. Before a government can become kind it must be right. Rightness is the virtue every citizen requires above all other government virtues.

The word "politics" has become tarnished by confusing it with party political feuds. Politics is not a thing apart from civilization, but a manifestation of civilization in growth. It changes form and function in accord with changes in the composition and ideals of society.

As long as we live in a changing world about which our knowledge is incomplete, we must be prepared to listen to other people's opinions about government and government measures. Political parties keep us reminded that there are at least two fairly meritorious sides to every major political question on which men disagree.

Kinds of government

Under the federal system of government in Canada there are: (1) a national government to control matters of concern to the whole country, and (2) provincial governments to control matters of concern to the individual provinces. Both sorts of government work openly, in the broad daylight of public scrutiny.

Diversity in unity, not legislated conformity, constitutes the strength of Canadian politics, but it tries, by persuasion and the application of common sense, to extend people's co-operative capacities.

Ours is representative government, consisting in the people's power to select and replace the executive charged with the task of administering the country's business. Instead of a town meeting we have government by elected representatives. That government represents the electors by making decisions in their behalf.

Representation by selection is a very great thing. The members of parliament form a deliberative assembly with one interest: that of the whole nation. Its members cease to be parochial. They owe the nation their broad-gauge unbiased opinions, their mature judgment, and their enlightened consciences.

They may receive the advice of their constituents, but they are not obliged to follow that advice if they believe it to be inconsistent with the general interests of their country. As people of conscience they have full freedom to act as their judgment prompts them to act.

Besides being representative, Canada's government is also responsible government. People placed in

power by the electors are accountable for their behaviour. The executive officials (the cabinet) must secure majority support for their proposals in the elected house, the House of Commons, or resign from office.

Modern society will not work without directing hands and technical experts in charge of its complicated machinery, but they must remain under control by the representatives elected by the people.

In spite of all the difficulties attending their working, parliamentary assemblies are the best form of government mankind has yet discovered. Parliament is not designed to dominate citizens but to promote their development so that every person may live and act in freedom from fear and with the opportunity to pursue what he believes to be the good life.

Parliament is not the tilting ground of factions or a forum for the recital of wrongs inflicted and sustained by various groups, but a place where representatives of the people can talk over the nation's problems. Thus people from every part of the country have a voice in deciding policies.

Duties of parliament

Canada is a country of great economic, geographic and ethnic diversity. It needs ties to draw it together and to reconcile its differences. The most important of these is the Parliament of Canada, consisting of the Senate and the House of Commons.

The House of Commons is the elective lower house whose business it is to arrive at agreement on the best measures for the good of the country. This can be done only through the opposition of forces, bringing out all relevant points in an issue.

Sir John G. Bourinot, historian and authority on parliamentary government, and author of *Parliamentary Procedure and Government in Canada*, put parliamentary duties in this way: "The principles that lie at the basis of English parliamentary law have been always kept steadily in view by the Canadian Parliament: these are — to protect a minority and restrain the improvidence or tyranny of a majority; to secure the transaction of public business in an orderly manner; to enable every member to express his opinion within the limits necessary to preserve decorum and prevent an unnecessary waste of time; and to prevent any legislative action being taken on sudden impulse."

The House of Commons is the working place of the men and women who have been elected by citizens to make decisions guiding the conduct of the country's affairs. It can be the scene of great decisions greatly made or the arena in which small matters are bloated into time-wasting talk.

There is constant effort being made by those members who think constructively about their role to increase the efficiency of the House. More has to be done than think up ideas and present them in speeches. The legislators must see that things are accomplished.

Rational democratic government requires intelligent discussion, a sustained, disciplined consideration of circumstances, of proposals and their implications, of possible courses of action and their advantages and disadvantages. And through it all there must be maintained the honour and dignity of men and women who represent the people of Canada.

The Opposition

The only stimulus which can keep the ability of the government of the time up to high standards is its liability to the well-informed criticism of equal ability outside its ranks.

No rational voter in a democracy will challenge the belief that the people must co-operate whole-heartedly with their leaders, but at the same time they need to be careful that the powers delegated to those leaders are not exceeded.

It is a defining characteristic of political democracy that there exists a legally-constituted organized party or parties in opposition to the party in power. This is part of the machinery of democratic self-control.

In Canada, the Opposition has an independent constitutional base. In working reality it participates in government. It forces the party in power to seek as broad and tolerable a synthesis of interests as possible; it ensures that the minority of voters will be represented to some degree in the policies decided upon; it restrains the party in power by examining its proposals for laws; it seeks to persuade the government to introduce bills which it thinks will benefit the people; it criticizes, but it should have valid and viable alternatives to offer. And, of course, it stands ready to replace the party in power if that party loses the confidence of the House.

It is no small honour and no little responsibility to serve in the Opposition. A person might be elected to parliament two or three times and never serve out of opposition, and yet contribute as greatly to the good and welfare of the country as if he had sat on the government side of the House.

Having an Opposition in the House of Commons lessens the burden resting on the shoulders of the voter. Even though the party for which he voted does not win enough seats to form the Government, it sits in judgment on the Government and can influence events.

All the political wisdom does not reside in one party or another. In *Lost Horizon* the sage Chang remarked: "Our people would be quite shocked by having to declare that one policy was completely right and another completely wrong." Between them, the Government and the Opposition hope to choose the better parts of all proposals.

The Upper House

The Senate of Canada provides regional representation on a non-elective basis, and is expected to be high and dry above the ebb and flow of party politics. Its powers, in all respects except one, are equal to those

of the House of Commons. The one exception is that bills to impose taxes or to appropriate public money must originate in the lower house.

The Senate was never intended to be a competitor of the House of Commons in the field of legislation, but the concurrence of the Senate is necessary before any piece of legislation, public or private, can become law.

The Senate provides a national forum for the discussion of public issues and the airing of grievances from any part of Canada, and through its committees it makes studies in depth of matters of public concern.

John Stuart Mill wrote in his treatise *On Representative Government*: "The consideration which tells most, in my judgment, in favour of two chambers, is the evil effect produced upon the mind of any holder of power, whether an individual or an assembly, by the consciousness of having only themselves to consult."

On being a Member

The tasks of a Member of Parliament are to identify the problems of Canadian society, to evolve policies from ideas, to decide upon action, and to carry through the programme.

What gives Parliament its life is the will of its members to serve it with their full capacities of mind and energy and passion.

A few think that upon winning office Aladdin's Lamp is part of the furnishings and that they can rub into existence anything that they can dream up. Instead, they find that they have to sit down and diagnose the situation with imaginative insight, do a lot of research, and then go to work. Government is an art to be learned, like medicine or engineering or law or any other profession, and not merely an office to be won.

Political service means a sacrifice of personal convenience for the public good. One who has vowed himself to politics is no longer a free agent: he is now a servant of the people. When he was in private life, he was subject to critical judgment by his neighbours; now that he is a member of parliament he is subject to evaluation by every voter in the country.

The Member of Parliament needs to keep himself free from obligations and pressures and to avoid even the appearance of evil. The reward of independence was avowed by Pliny, a prominent lawyer, administrator and landowner: "How glad I am that I have always kept clear of any contracts, presents, remunerations, or even small gifts for my conduct of cases."

Political machinery does not act of itself. It needs active participation. Napoleon once referred to people who "have no blood in their veins, nothing but frozen politics." No modern politician can thrive unless he has the mental stimulus of contact with the needs of the country and the desires of the people, and the physical urge to get on with the business of satisfying these needs and desires.

Apply good politics

The simple virtues constitute good politics in a parliamentary democracy. We admire the conduct of those men and women in public life who courageously, honestly and intelligently come to conclusions based on reason, and having come to those conclusions, can state them fairly, stick by them, and act accordingly.

Sincerity is a vital quality in the person seeking or holding public office. It means being free from deceit, hypocrisy or falseness.

When engaging in politics we are in a large-scale impersonal world removed from contact with the individuals on whose affairs and interests we are forming a judgment and taking action. It is, therefore, much harder to bring our ordinary moral attitudes, such as sympathy, patience, kindness and scrupulous justice, into play than in private life. But it is essential for the good man or woman in public life to make the effort.

Machiavelli, in *The Prince*, agrees that keeping faith is praiseworthy, but that deceit, hypocrisy, and perjury are necessary and excusable for the sake of holding on to political power. This view has been universally condemned.

One duty the parliamentary representative undoubtedly owes to his constituents is to keep them informed about his actions and what is going on in parliament. Though the electors cannot be informed on every issue that confronts government, they must be sufficiently informed to understand the main drift of the issues and the whys and wherefores of their representative's actions.

It is true that government during the past several decades has been withdrawing from practical contact with citizens as individuals. Men and women become increasingly mere units in statistical tables.

This causes many a crevasse of misunderstanding between citizens and those who act for them in government. Widespread popular government requires a steady supply of information upon public affairs to all citizens, and not merely an account of what was done but why it was done.

Government depends upon consent; the expression of free consent is frustrated if it is given in ignorance of facts that should have been made known. People must learn what is true in order to judge rightly.

Leadership is crucial

Every person elected to parliament is a leader in that he represents thousands of persons in their effort to build a community in which they can live safely and happily. The future of Canada depends upon the willingness of the people to be led by competent and conscientious representatives in government, and on the willingness and ability of the leaders to serve the people upon such terms as the democratic people will accept.

Leaders need to be sensitive to what is significant and what is trivial and to be prepared to rise above sectional and selfish interests. They need to have minds attuned to coping with events and crises. They should cultivate the capacity Churchill showed when he united the British people and lifted them above what divided them.

No member should allow himself to be oppressed by granitic convictions on a subject under debate. He should be willing to hear what is said to him by his constituents, his party members and those opposed to him.

On the other hand, he should beware of slipping into the groove of governing by public opinion polls. Depending upon the man-in-the-street for advice on a legal measure or on the conduct of business with a foreign country is about as futile as for the captain of a ship to consult his passengers upon problems of navigation. The public figure going around always with his ear to the ground is in an ungainly posture, and it is difficult for him to look like a leader.

Toward an ideal state

Part of a leader's duty is to persuade his fellow citizens to pursue not that which seems most pleasant, easy or profitable at the moment, but to prefer that which is just and honourable and best in the long run.

The representative of the people in a parliamentary democracy would be delinquent in his duty if he presented a picture postcard view of the promised land as the ideal to be aimed at. The building of Utopia must be in line with the resources of the country. Plato, in designing his ideal Republic, lived in an age so stinted in necessities and so scanty in comfort that he had only to provide that there would be enough territory on which to grow food, and that the inhabitants must not let their wants exceed the bounties of nature.

Utopia cannot be anything else but a place where men and women will mind their business and do their assignment of work diligently for the sake of living well. Nevertheless, the educational value of painting utopias has repeatedly been established by the fact that many utopian ideals have been realized through the democratic process.

The good society is above all a society that is examining and learning and putting into practice. It attends to what needs to be done today, but it has eyes for the horizon toward which it is moving. Every member of parliament should look for and work toward better things: indeed, if he does not do so how can he be a wise guardian of present things?

Then, in co-operation with the people, he can address himself to expanding the satisfactions of life, by binding the parts of Canada together not only in geography but in the bond of participating citizenship. Instead of seeking merely a higher standard of living, Canadians will try unitedly to improve the quality of life.