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Summary :

Halfway the trip where the CA now is, it should pose to look back and make course corrections, as it may, to make up for what it lost thus far on the way.

COURSE CORRECTION BECOMES THE WISE

NB: This item is also published in the Alcyone New e-newsletter , www.alcyonenews.ca

In my Review of the CA Phase I Preliminary Statement, I argued that the CA had not started out on the right foot. For the entire six-weekend period that was "Phase I", the CA members were schooled in the official line and trained to see things the way the CA managers do. During that time the government-appointed CA managers established their hegemony over the CA. I provided some hints on how the CA should have started in that Review but I was told I should be more explicit and this I am doing now.

Let us start by pondering the CA genesis: If not by means of a government appointee, how could the CA have come to be, how would it start, how would it travel the road to its task? That is a good question with a simple answer like all good questions are.

To begin with, the selection of the CA members was in the domain of the CEO (Chief Electoral Officer) of the Province. Indeed, the CEO did the selection of the 200 candidates from each electoral riding, but then the process was taken away from him and handed to the government-appointed CA Chair to complete. This is not to say that the selection process was done necessarily deficiently, yet the optics are not as good as if the CEO had done it, for it is his job and he is shielded against influences that would affect "elections". Surely it was not the CA Manager's role to select the CA members.

The CA has a close parallel in the Legislature. The position assigned to Blaney ought to be that of the Clerk of the CA, in parallel to the Clerk of the Legislature. Blaney should have been assigned the organizational tasks, from purchasing paper clips to the logistics of bringing into session the CA, but nothing beyond this jurisdiction.

One could further argue that the Clerk of the CA should not have been a government appointee. The Public Service Commission could have advertised the position in advance and the CA could select whoever they deemed to be the best. For no matter what, a government appointee, even if laundered through the Legislature, save a "77 vs. 2" legislature, would remain tainted.

The CA is an ad hoc parliament, therefore the government should have no means by which to control it. Once the Campbell liberals bid the CA for votes and the voters of British Columbia voted then into power, "the cat got out of the bag and would not go back". Or so it ought to be, but the Campbell government had second thoughts, it seems, which is not unusual with politicians elected under the current system. Sad as it is, they sought to turn the CA into an election prop for the next election.

The government controls the Legislature by that is not by right, it is an aberration, if

not downright subversion. It is, perhaps, because the government controls the parliament and likes it this way, that they sought to control the CA. And while a Viceroy may not be quite a "Party Whip", a cleverly selected one may keep things securely under control. Yet the *raison d'être* of the CA is to end the highjacking of parliament by "elected tyrants", its purpose is to abolish the barbaric Party Whip, its ultimate goal being the restoration of parliament to its democratic glory and its return to the people to whom it belongs.

The first task of the CA members should have been to elect their own Chair, the "Speaker of the Citizens' Assembly", if you will. This process, a standard adhered to even by quilting guilds and model boat clubs and trial juries, would have established the autonomy of the CA and secured the democratic process as its *modus operandi*, these being ingrained in the citizens assembly concept itself, as well as in the specific task of this particular Citizens' Assembly.

The CA could then plot its course independently, using their own resources and applying their collective wisdom. Let's not forget that the defining characteristic of a citizens assembly is it being "peers" of the people, being of "we, the citizens" - certainly it must not become a platoon of foot soldiers for a king.

These are essential. Perhaps that is why the CA managers spare no effort to inform the uninformed that the CA is "power to the people", "non-partisan" and "independent". But no matter what the frequency of the pronouncements, and how categorically they are made, skepticism will persist.

The next task of such an ad-hoc body is to come to terms with itself, to recognize its mission, assert its authority and to assess the compatibility and adequacy of the two. The CA ought to wrestle with these issues before taking any further steps. It did not do that then, it has not done so as yet, perhaps it should do it now. I will explain.

"Coming to terms with oneself" is heeding Socrates' *Gnothi s'afton, know thyself*. It means the CA members recognizing that they are no less than an ad-hoc parliament, albeit one elected in a different way than a regular parliament, nonetheless a "parliament". They got into it by lottery, and although one may consider lottery not a substantial substitute for the ballot system, it arguably is more democratic a process than the corrupt electoral system that produced a "77 vs. 2" legislature.

The CA then ought to examine critically where the government is driving the CA through Gibson and Blaney. To consider aspects such as the attempt to route the CA toward a single remedy to an ailing electoral system, a system that is inherently multifaceted. At the very top of the CA agenda ought to be answering the question: **"Is mending the "way votes translate into MLAs" sufficient to ensure a democratic election system?"**. If they would find, as they certainly would have or will, that reforming the way votes are counted comes pitifully short of democratizing the electoral system, the CA should have brought this to the attention of the society and have sought to re-define the parameters of their enterprise. Certainly they are not in the CA **to fix the barngate but leave the barnwalls with gaping holes**, so as to create good optics for the government's re-election bid.

The professed purpose of the CA is to do electoral reform. **Does "electoral**

reform” mean other than to make the electoral system democratic? Is an electoral system democratic if it allows minorities to govern the society against the will of majorities? Must not anything that may facilitate the hijacking of government by minorities be summarily rejected and scratched off the CA agenda? Is the Electoral system democratic if it allows moneyed interests to buy elections for whoever they wish to bribe? Is the electoral bazaar, where politicians peddle influence for their career financing, compatible with democracy? Is the CA to produce a democratic Election System, which, as proclaimed in the New Era Commitment, will result in or contribute to: “.... **reform how government works from top to bottom, to create the most open, democratic and accountable government in Canada**”?

Well, while we are at it, why only **the most democratic in Canada**, why not make **it the best in the world**?

Here is a short list of essential questions an autonomous CA ought to grapple with:

- * Is the CA to be guided by the New Era Commitment on which British Columbians voted, or on the after-the election Gibson - Campbell - Blaney interpretation of what the party “thought” they had committed a Liberal Government to do?
- * Is it conceivable that the solution of one problem of a multifaceted electoral system would cure all its ills? Would a change of the way votes translate into MLA seats make the Electoral system democratic? Is it conceivable that such a panacea exists?
- * Is it conceivable that 160 people may come up with a single solution to one only aspect of a multifaceted institution that elections are? Is it conceivable that there is such a “clear cut” solution and if there is such, why would society need a CA and the input of citizens through public hearings to identify it?
- * What may stand in the way of the CA making as many proposals as they deem sufficient to achieve the democratization of the electoral system and let the people decide on these proposals? Would that not be democratic? Would this approach not make meaningful and otherwise facilitate the work of the 160 strong CA?

The CA ought to invite Gordon Gibson to explain his Report on which the government relied to set up the CA. His explanation would have been constructive to understanding the situation. It would have been especially conducive to assessing that incredible recommendation to straight-jacket the CA to a single, “yes or no” type, conclusion on such a multifaceted matters as electoral reform is.

Gibson made this recommendation for a single simple question by attributing the placebo Recall and Initiative act to bad referendum questions. Yet, Rita Johnson’s phrasing of the questions of the 1991 Recall and Initiative Referendum was clear-as-a-bell. In contrast, the Campbell Liberal Government’s questions of the 2002 Aboriginal Treaty Referendum were thoroughly convoluted. Yet, Gibson elected to use the Rita Johnston’s questions as his example of inappropriate referendum questions.

It would have been amusing to hear Gibson explain why he based his recommendation on Rita Johnston’s questions. And why he said naught about the Gordon

Campbell referendum question-composing mode.... What Gibson would say may have helped the CA members understand how governments chose whom they appoint.

At the very top of the CA agenda ought to be tapping the creativity of British Columbians, indeed of everyone, in a concerted search for the most democratic electoral system humans may create? This, the tapping of the minds of the people, is a fundamental tenet of democracy and ought to be pursued vigorously by the CA. Not merely going through the hearings routine like Ujjal Dosanjh did with Recall and Initiative, but meaningfully stimulating the minds of the people and harvesting the crop of ideas this would yield. Indeed, the CA is duty bound to do that.

I suggested a good way for doing so, in the January 14, 2004 Alcyone News article "An Ideas Bank for the CA". One doubts not, that the cause of democratizing the electoral system would have benefited greatly had the CA adopted it, or some variation on that theme. The CA managers did not welcome my suggestion, they did not put it on the agenda for discussion by the CA members, on the contrary, they spared no effort to keep it out of sight of the CA members.

Dum spiro spero, for as long as I breath I hope. Who knows, it may not be too late yet, the CA may recover from the boot camp effects, I for one hope they will.

The subject is not exhausted, there is more the CA could do and would have done if their energies were not funneled into attending boot camp. But I will pause here, enough for today.

Tom Varzeliotis.