

Educating the CA

Don't fence me in,

Just turn me loose

Underneath the western skies

Cole Porter, musician-songwriter.

Affection for education matches, almost, that for motherhood. Indeed, everyone loves education, so much so, that we spend on it huge sums of money, comparable to our outlay for health care. And we go to great pains to deliver our young to the universities, where, for several years they are educated and indebted. Then, on convocation day we proudly send them out full of wisdom and heavily saddled with debt to do nation building and to conquer the world.

Reverence for education is mandatory, inquiry, therefore, is obligatory. It takes not much of the latter to recognize that education often takes an ugly form, that of indoctrination. This, in turn, is toxic to the mind, resulting in serious reduction of performance.

Indoctrination impacts the thinking capacity of the mind, corrupts its ability to judge and impedes seriously ones' other faculties. The "education" of army recruits and of the young born into religious societies exemplify the damage indoctrination does to the mind. Indeed, combined, these two example practices have resulted in much grief to whole world, throughout history.

There is no evidence that the government intends to brainwash the CA, indeed I do not believe there is any such intention. However, it is known that the CA members will be provided a substantial "education" on electoral systems and associated subjects. Such education, even if of sterling objectivity, is dangerous because it can channel thinking into a narrow corridor, while a broad perspective is essential to perform the task on hand.

It is advertised on the CA website that the CA will convene, for the first time, on January 10-11, 2004, at the Morris J. Wosk Centre, in Vancouver, BC. The agenda of that meeting, published on the CA website is not very explicit:

Saturday morning: Getting started.

Saturday afternoon: Politics in BC - What do we want?

Sunday Morning: Criteria for evaluating electoral systems - System and voters

The course material is as yet unknown to the public and the titles of the lectures are not very revealing. I will, however, review the titles briefly. Later on, when the course material is posted on the CA website, as promised, I may take another, more serious look.

"Getting started" is a good title to start with. One presumes it means "Coffee, Donuts and Danish" with which to crack the ice that sometimes forms when 160 strangers are brought together. Assuming it is so, I wish a good time to all.

The Saturday afternoon agenda worries me a bit. "Politics in BC" could be anything. Who will explain the BC politics to the CA members? How much of it can one do in a Saturday afternoon? Was this session prompted by a discovery that CA members were deficient on the subject and in need of education? if so who made this diagnosis and how?

I doubt that Gordon Campbell himself will deliver the lecture, yet I doubt the objectivity and the adequacy of such an introduction to BC Politics. I am confident that whoever the lecturer, he/she/they will act in good faith, however we all know that beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. We also know of the existence of spin-doctors - and the political stage, especially it, is seriously infested with them.

Would it then be preferable to preserve the whole spectrum of views brought to the CA through the random selection of its members? Would it not be advisable to allow a sort of "multi-political-ism" in the CA, like we foster multi-cultural-ism in our society? Just asking...

"What do we want" is a question familiar to Canadians, for it has been, perpetually, flicked across the Canada-Quebec border. It has stubbornly defied answer because neither the Quebecois nor the "Anglos" dare expose their inner thoughts. In the matter at hand the question "What do we want" may refer either to "Politics in BC" in general, or the electoral reform, in particular. In the latter event we need not search further, for the answer is known and it is: implementation of the New Era Commitment to allow the citizenry to do a thorough Electoral Reform. That is all.

Although we know the destination, we need to navigate our way there. We need search for an electoral system that will meet the needs of British Columbia, a system that would enable us to govern ourselves democratically. We need to discover, or devise, an electoral system that would allow the best of us to the helm of the society and which would block out the inept and the sinister. Unless the politicians throw the proverbial monkey wrench into the gearbox of the CA we will get there.

The next CA educational session is not described with more clarity than the previous ones. "Criteria for evaluating electoral systems - System and voters" this session is billed, and this is cryptic. It leaves me for one perplexed on potential content of that Sunday morning sermon to the CA.

To a large extent a verdict depends on the criteria employed in the process. Whoever defines the rules of the game determines, to a substantial extent, the outcome of the match. The Terms of Reference issued the CA by the government, bear bad omens about the "criteria" in store for the CA. Take, for example, the "criterion" that the CA decision "must not impact on the political system". Application of this "criterion" will ensure that the CA may not come up with anything more potent than a new recipe for donuts or hamburgers.

To recap now this cursory look at the subject of the first education semester. What I know about the CA education program, is severely limited, at least for now and this not because of my reluctance to learn. But no matter what wisdom about to be force-fed to the CA, for now at least, I would prefer to see the educational program scrapped.

It is preferable, I suggest to let the CA members rely on their minds, on their judgment, let them bring to the outcome of the CA enterprise their individual perspectives. They reflect the society, for they were chosen at random to represent us, "we the people". They should remain so, they should not be turned into specialists, for, among other objections, they will no longer be "like us". If "education" was the preferred qualification of Election System Builders, we could get university professors instead of "ordinary Canadians". Professors are abundant, they come pre-educated, wonderfully predictable as to outcome, ready to peddle their wisdom. This time around let the people speak out.

Let the vox populi be heard, let the hoi polloi have a turn. Let the CA listen to their fellow citizens, let them harvest the wisdom of the

rest of the people. Let the CA members apply their own judgment, to sort the wheat from the chaff and bake us a new wholesome Electoral System - as we would like it.

Don't let the politicians fence us in, there is much out there underneath the Elections skies.