

The Party Factor

I touched upon this facet of elections in the article number "Nominations", of this series. But there is more to it than I discussed there and in this article I will look further into the ways parties interfere with the electoral process in their effort to bypass democracy in their race to power.

It is difficult to discuss this subject, not because it is complex, but mainly because it is embedded firmly into the conventional wisdom and we have been made non-receptive to whatever is there being challenged. Indeed, conventional wisdom serves mainly to sustain concepts, which would collapse if aired in debate for otherwise they would not need to be sustained by conventional wisdom. Accordingly, political parties are deemed sacrosanct and irreverence to them may be equated to blasphemy.

We have been thoroughly conditioned to believe that Democracy and parties go together like a horse and carriage, or like love and marriage and that you can't have the one without the other. Although we no longer believe that such pairs are as inseparable as Frank Sinatra thought they were, we still believe that democracy and elections cannot survive divorce and must, therefore, be kept together, no matter the suffering their union causes. But it ain't necessarily so - Democracy and political parties do not really go together, they are more adversarial than complementary.

Things being as they are, political parties dominate the election stage and this is not because they are constructive to the governance of the society. On the contrary, the involvement of parties distorts the electoral process to the detriment of democracy and this translates into a lowering of the overall well-being of the society.

Political parties are ruthless election manipulators. They have made it their business to interfere with elections and have done so for some time. Over this period they have managed to transform elections into something totally different from what they were meant to be. Specifically, they have turned elections into party-wars, ending with the occupation of parliament, which they fragment into party zones resembling post WWII Germany. The occupation troops are Party Representatives, mostly mercenaries, who have displaced the rightful Members of the House, the Peoples' Representatives. A House of party representatives is not the parliament of a democratically governed

society. What brought them in is not a democratic election; it is a wooden horse like the one Odysseus pioneered in Troy.

The political parties have hijacked the election nomination process and taken it away from the public domain. Candidate nomination, as it is presently done, is internal to political parties, which makes it a thoroughly private process.

I recognize that party membership is generally open to the public, but this does not make party candidate nominations a public process. To begin with, to join a party, a citizen must forfeit the "secret ballot" and this alone is a formidable roadblock for many citizens. Then, party membership affirms one's faith in the party's ideology and manifests obedience to the party hierarchy, to which many citizens refuse to submit. It also implies that party members partake in party wars, both defensive and offensive, which again does not go well with many people. The requirements for party membership are indeed substantial and, most significantly, they are over and above what a citizen needs meet to qualify as a voter. In other words, a private group of people, the party, imposes citizenship requirements in excess of what the public electoral system requires.

Party control over the nominations is all inclusive, it reaches to the top - it is the parties who control the nomination of all, from those destined to the furthest back benches of the House to those seeking the front row seating reserved for the Prime Minister, and his ministers. This downgrades the electorate to the level of judges of beauty pageants, as the voters are forced to vote for whomever the parties parade on the election runway. What it boils down to is that the majority of citizens are excluded from partaking in the selection of who will exercise immense authority over them and who will affect their well-being and who will plot the future of their society.

While some people may be unwilling to submit themselves to party discipline and are, therefore, forbidden to participate in the candidate nomination process, that is not the case with unscrupulous individuals. They are known to go as far as to assemble and manage "mobile nomination groups" and move them into political parties expressly to dominate the nomination process. Things have gone so far the wrong way that society has recently been treated to the spectacle of politicians courting such nomination warlords and otherwise contributing to institutionalizing the swindle.

Of course, even without the "mobile nomination groups", the nomination process was and is routinely manipulated to affect the will of the party hierarchy. But this is done mostly discreetly by the party's "backroom crew", dexterously pulling the strings from behind the scenes keeping the machinations hidden from the public eye. But it is not always so, for recently even fake optics are often omitted by persons no less than party leaders. Chretien personally imposed candidates on constituencies and on April Fools Day, 2004, Paul Martin flew in to Vancouver to impose personally, in situ, three Liberal candidates for the upcoming election. One presumes he had to do it himself because he, or they, could not persuade the respective Liberal riding associations to nominate the candidates in question.

All this transpired at the same time Martin pledges to democratize the political system and has launched a crusade to eliminate the "democratic deficit", as he calls it, ostensibly to invoke his reputation as a fierce "deficit slayer". Significantly, one of the three, the candidate Martin imposed on the riding of Vancouver South, is none other than Ujjal Dosanjh, a man whose election to the leadership of the BC NDP was rumored to have been aided by "mobile nomination groups". He is the same Dosanjh who cleverly concocted the placebo Recall and Initiative Act, that infamous piece of cosmetic reform, with which the NDP suppressed the will of over 80% of the British Columbians after it was expressed unambiguously in the 1991 referendum. Evidently, with Martin and Dosanjh wrestling the "democratic deficit", democracy needs fear no subversives...

In a representative democracy there is only one qualification a Prime Minister must meet, that being the confidence of Parliament. This is independent of political parties, it is internal to a parliament, it is for the electorate to decide, through their representatives who the Prime Minister is to be. Indeed, it is to subvert this process, that political parties usurped the electoral process and abuse it to "elect" members of parliament pre-programmed to express seamless confidence in whoever the party wants to be Prime Minister.

There is a vast difference in whether a Prime Minister is sustained by the parliament or whether he is propped up by a flock of MPs driven by a Party Whip.

Another adverse consequence from party involvement in elections is the ensuing interaction of platform ideologies, party leader and local candidate personalities. For example, a voter may stand ideologically with Party A, may deem Party B to be the lesser evil due to its lack of

ethos, may like the local candidate of Party C and may think that the leader of Party D would make the best, or the less objectionable, Prime Minister. But the voter is denied this choice. The parties each impose a package of all those attributes, thereby forcing the voters to take the bad along with the good, and this for no reason other than serving the party's self-interest.

In so-called "safe party seats" it is the parties who "elect" the people's representative to parliament, thereby reducing the voters to mere cheerleaders. The power of parties is similar under other circumstances, such as when widespread aversion to, fear of, or disgust for the governing party, become the catalysts for dislodging it from the halls of power. The party standing to benefit from the misfortune of the governing party, for all intents and purposes, "elects" the people's representatives in many ridings.

All told, a large proportion of the people's representatives in a parliament, in every parliament, are elected without any meaningful involvement of the electorate, instead they are, de facto, appointed by the parties. This is Party-ocracy, which is very different from Democracy.

We have a good example of it in Premier Gordon Campbell of British Columbia. For whatever reason, the people never developed an affinity for Campbell. Whether he is deserving or undeserving hardly matters here, pertinent is that people do not like and do not trust Gordon Campbell. It appears that this was the reason the Glen Clark NDP won over the Campbell Liberals in the 1998 election, which compelled British Columbians to endure a term of NDP government when they did not want to. In the 2001 election, the determination to oust the NDP had grown further and prevailed over the unpopularity of Campbell, resulting in the "election" of the Campbell Liberals. This Campbell interpreted as a mandate do the "governing" people feared he would do, which, also manifests to the need to distance political parties from elections.

Let us imagine now an election without political parties; let us pretend that parties do not exist for an election period. Then, citizens may nominate themselves to run for parliament, or may be nominated by a reasonable number of voters, any voters.

Candidates then would be free of the obligations and commitments to political parties and free from the burden of selling party platforms to the people. They will be free to be themselves, to listen to their

constituents. Because there would likely be numerous candidates and because they would be free of party controls, a wider spectrum of issues would be aired and debated than would be the case if parties were involved. Such open season on issues will result in a well-informed citizenry, which is a prerequisite to democratic governance of any society. Because they would have not submitted their loyalty to a party, candidates would offer their loyalty to their constituency and the society at large.

The people will become attentive when the candidates will not flog party lines. The perception, common now, that once you have heard one, (of each party), you have heard them all, results in indifference, it is in the nature of things. Vigorous debate of issues will revitalize the political system and this is immensely important to a democracy, for it relies on an informed electorate.

Because candidates could not be elected on the strength of party affiliation or condemned because of it, they would rely only, or primarily, on personal merit, including integrity of character and talent to manage and lead. This will result in a true parliament, where members are able to discern what is right and who is free to stand for it, which is drastically different from the current party-elected members who are trained to shout "Yeh" or "nay" on command from the party whip.

Of course, in the absence of parties, the number of candidates will tend to increase over what it is at present. However, if and when the need to keep the number of candidates to a reasonable level presents itself, we could devise appropriate means to address it. If preventing overcrowded ballots is the reason for enduring parties, it is a poor way of doing it and surely we can do better than that and do it by sensible means.

Let's now go one step further; let's imagine how a parliament elected without party intervention would function. To begin our venture with, we should recognize that human nature being what it is, the members of parliament would coalesce into alliances. For example, members opposing gay marriage will coalesce and so would those supporting the opposite view. The pro- and the anti-gun registry groups, will each include anti- and pro-same sex marriage members and vice versa, and so it will be with other issues. As a result there will be many "parties" formed around the major topics of the day, overlapping, most having life spans no longer than it would take to settle the cause of their genesis. Each of these parties would try to persuade not only their

opposites, but the whole parliament, especially targeting members impartial to their particular peeve, for it will be the parliament, not the party whip with the biggest herd who, at the end of the day will decide the issue.

Because such mini-parties, member alliances if you prefer, will be continuously formed and dissolved driven by need more than by ideology, Parliament will no longer be stiff and prone to manipulation. It will be, instead, flexible, or "fluid" if you will, ever-adapting to changing circumstances, responsive to the will of the people. The overall result will be a virile parliament of real peoples' representative, a worthwhile replacement for the current "rubberstamps".

Since the Prime Minister would not be an imposed party leader, society would be spared the "elected tyrants", we now experience. For the Prime Minister would be chosen and appointed by "we the people", albeit not directly but through our representatives in the parliament. Whoever is thus appointed to govern would be accountable not to party backroom hacks, but to parliament, to the representatives of the people. They would hold him/her instantly answerable and would have the power to replace him /her, as promptly as circumstances may dictate, thereby sparing society the need to endure unpopular or disastrous regimes.

In turn, the members of the parliament, would have to account for their actions to the people, for they would not have the facility to claim "party discipline" as their defense for government improprieties, or excuse themselves with the old line "the party made me do it". Nor would they have the party propaganda machine to help them evade accountability and otherwise do damage control.

The "Party" concept must be pulled from the bowels of conventional wisdom to be aired, to be seen and debated. It is only thus that we may come to terms with reality, we may recognize that Parliament is not like the Hockey League and political parties are not like the NHL teams, that the citizens of a free society must not be made into Party "Fans"; that parliament is an assembly of peoples' representatives, that it is not an arena where warring factions fight for access to the public trough. If this is done, if the issue is aired, debated and understood, the people will restore parliament to its proper role, they will return to being an assembly of peoples' representatives, mandated to bring together the wishes and the wisdom of their constituents and funnel it to the governance of the society.

Were we to do a thorough democratization of our political system, the role of the parties in elections cannot conceivably escape scrutiny and my belief is that parties would end up distanced from the electoral process. Such a thorough review is beyond what we may expect from the CA for, among other reasons, it cannot fit into its time frame. It is however, well within CA's means to raise public awareness of this and other facets of electoral systems. It is indeed the duty of the CA to embed this and other facets of the electoral system prominently on the society's political agenda.