

Fixing the Election Dates

Fixing the election dates was one of the 200 New Era Commitments the Campbell Liberals bid for the vote of British Columbians in the 2001 general election. Since fixing the election dates is part of the electoral system, this commitment appears superfluous to that to create a citizens assembly on electoral reform.

The Liberals fulfilled their commitment to fix the election dates. They decreed elections be held every fourth year, starting with their election in 2001. Previously elections were held at the whim of the Premier and the governing party hierarchy. This fixing of the election dates makes right of a wrong but falls short of doing all that could be done, all that needs to be done.

The mechanics of the old system are interesting. In a representative democracy the government is sustained by the confidence of the majority of the people, expressed through their representatives in parliament. Things being as they are, who were to be the peoples representatives, are now party mercenaries. Since, in most instances the government firmly controls the majority of these mercenaries, it can "withdraw" parliament's support on itself, thereby triggering the election process. It is done politely, with the Premier resigning and declaring solemnly that he/she triggered the election to serve the cause of democracy.

Significantly, when a pundit asked Premier W.A.C. Bennett, the day after one of his several electoral victories, whether he knew that he would win in advance of calling the election, Bennett replied with a question of his own: "Do you think I would have called the election if I wasn't sure I would win it?" It tells all that need be said.

But, have the Campbell Liberals really solved the problem? Must we celebrate their fixing of election dates and leave things at that, must we be content that elections are no longer to be held at the whim of the Premier du jour? Have they exhausted the possibilities?

To begin with, the Liberals fixed the election dates four years apart, "or immediately if any government loses a confidence vote in the Legislature." Setting elections at the frequency of leap years (albeit not on February the 29th) is good but the provision for elections when a government is defeated in the Legislature is questionable.

For starters, it is conceivable that a government who badly want an election may stage a "loss of confidence vote" to get it. Indeed, with some clever PR work, the impropriety could be done in ways that the blame is transferred foursquare onto the opposition.

But the main objection to this *lose a vote - gain an election*, provision is in that it endorses the subservience of the society to political parties. It implies that it is the parties who must determine who the Premier is to be. It degrades the people to the role of arbitrating who of the parties will impose its boss upon the society. It denies the people their democratic right to choose who is to govern their society, it forces the people to endure the *lesser evil* there is in the parties' menu. Euphemisms and sophistries aside, it is subverting democracy.

Representative democracy means people governing themselves through their representatives in a parliament. This includes the selection, appointment and removal of the Prime Minister.

Accordingly, a vote of no confidence means that the peoples' representatives have no confidence on the prime minister, no more no less than that. It does not mean that they would not trust anyone else. In a real democracy the inappropriate behaviour of a prime minister does not result in the meltdown of the society's parliament. And while a parliament may vote non-confidence on the prime minister, surely cannot loose confidence in itself.

If political parties were distanced from elections, the members of parliament would be neither indebted to political parties nor relying on them for re-election. They would no longer submit to being herded by Party Whips, they would, instead, be responsive to the citizenry and would function on their proper role. Parliament would then regain the authority to appoint and replace the prime minister, as circumstances would dictate at any given time.

Another factor against this "lose a vote, have an election" system is that it becomes dysfunctional when needed and potent when it is not needed. Look no further than Ottawa, no further back in time than the seventies. This system removed the innocuous Joe Clark government but failed to dislodge the popularly detested Brian Mulroney government. This happens because the more MLAs, or MPs, a party controls, the safer it feels, the more arrogant it becomes, the more cause it gives for its removal from the helm, yet, the more difficult it is to dislodge it from the seat of power because of the number of rubberstamps it controls. And visa versa.

Enough of that, now we may review the issue of the fixed election date. To begin with, hard as I try I find no reason for returning to floating election dates, as we had before Campbell fixed them in BC and as they still exist in other jurisdictions. Clearly, allowing the prime minister to decide the election day is incompatible with democracy. Having said that, I will move on to take a closer look at variations to the fixed election date theme.

The Liberals selected four year election intervals because that is the maximum allowed. But, should the tenure of a parliament be limited to four years? One wonders why it should be four, why not three, five or any other number? Why not consider a perpetual parliament, one with a continuity resembling that of the citizenry? The last one is my favourite, for it is the most democratic.

I deem the four-year term optimum, not because I could defend it, for I cannot. Yet, if there is a cause of opting for other than a four year term, I do not know it and I will proceed on the assumption that this is the optimum term for MLAs to serve. The CA may come up with a better one.

I do see good and valid reasons for staggering the election of the members of parliament. Of course they stagger elections in the USA, but this does not necessarily makes it a bad idea.

There are several ways of staggering elections. For example we can have elections in half the ridings at a time, electing half the MLAs in the house, the other half to be elected two years later. Alternatively, the ridings could be re-arranged so that each is represented by two MLAs, one of them being elected every two years for a four year term. In the former arrangement, one half of the citizens will elect one half of the MLAs in each election - in the latter, all the citizens would elect half the MLAs every second year.

A better version of this would be elections held every year, each in one quarter of the ridings. MLAs will serve a four-year term, as it is now, however, the house will be constantly evolving and renewed, in parallel with the population.

There are strong advantages to partial, staggered elections, but before reviewing some of them, I should anticipate the usual sophistries in defense of the status quo.

Elections are expensive, some may say, we cannot afford more of them. To this I say: Alternatives to democracy are costlier than it. Then, I will suggest that although four "quarter-province" elections may cost more than one province-wide election, there is some efficiency in frequency that would take care of some of the extra expense.

Then, great savings may be realized by automating various components of the electoral system and otherwise harmonizing it with modern times. We live in an era where a man in Iraq can access his bank account in Montreal through an ATM, to withdraw money, or NASA may drive a vehicle on Mars from Houston, Texas. Surely casting ballots electronically is not anywhere near as difficult as it presented to be by those with a stake in keeping balloting cumbersome.

Furthermore, reform of other aspects of the election system would affect serious savings over the current system. For example, if the election system is distanced from megabusiness and megalabour, as it must be, and elections are conducted in a decent manner, again as it must be, cost would come under control, as I argued in previous articles in this series.

Another sophistry likely to be voiced is the contention that elections disrupt the governing of the society and the routine of the citizenry. This appears misdirected, it is barking up the wrong tree. Let's look at it.

Presently, during election periods, parliament, ceases to exist for it is "dissolved" the moment the election is called. The cabinet, ostensibly functions, but it is dysfunctional, considering that the ministers are out hunting votes for themselves and their party. Moreover, the government has no parliament support, for parliament has been dissolved.

Under the yearly election system only one quarter of the MLAs would be absent from the House during election time. The other three quarters of them will be in the House, maintaining it functional. Indeed, one may observe that this would be adequate, considering what happens now, when the chamber is often empty to a bare quorum level, as Honourable Members of opposite parties "pair" and go on junkets or enjoy themselves at the neighborhood Bar & Grille.

I cannot anticipate other sophistries, but I would consider any that may come up. In the meantime I will visit some advantages of that split-election system.

The electorate will have the democratic facility to update the Legislature yearly. At least one quarter of the voters would have the opportunity to consider course correction, when necessary, and vote accordingly, to the benefit of the entire society. If they feel that the legislature pulls to the side the people do not like, they would no longer have to wait for years, they would be able to make things right through the year's election. The legislature would be representative of the people, would reflect current needs and would address present circumstances. After all, the need for course correction does not appear every four years, it happens more frequently, it may appear at any time. The four year interval may have been proper, or necessary, in the horse and carriage days, it is patently inadequate in the rocket and silicon-chip epoch.

A most worthwhile benefit from yearly quarter elections is in that they will foster awareness of issues and will result in an enlightened citizenry, in a citizenry that is current in public affairs. Considering that the potency of democracy is measured by the level of citizen enlightenment, the ultimate result will be more democratic governance of the society, which will materialize in more prosperity and higher overall well-being than it is under the current system of an election after each four years of political disenfranchisement.

Whether we vote when it suits the "elected tyrant", or once every fourth year or more frequently, is a matter for the CA to consider and British Columbians to decide. It is incumbent on the CA to raise public awareness of it and otherwise facilitate its resolution. If the CA shuns it, it will be a lost opportunity, for us all and, perhaps. For generations to come.