

The Parties' Part

Ms. Paterson's column of April 25, 2004, in the Victoria Times-Colonist is awfully interesting. She refers to the recent political history of British Columbia, observing that, we the voters, have been swinging our Province to the Right and swinging her to the Left, never giving her a rest or a promenade. We deny her the time for the wounds and bruises she suffers in the process to heal, Paterson observes, and pleads with us to give our Province a rest. But she fears the worse - as election day approaches, she sees us going for more of the same and predicts an escalation of the deterioration to our well-being from this new swing.

"How can it (British Columbia, be not as bad as it is) when no government has stayed in power for more than one term?", Paterson wonders aloud, expecting agreement. Then she takes us further down the awareness road for a closer look at our predicament: "In less than two decades, we've gone through eight premiers in B.C. More importantly, we've gone through at least eight political agendas, several dozen cabinet ministers and probably hundreds of key bureaucrats, and chased our tails through one massive rewrite of provincial regulation after another" she writes.

She sounds like the two Profs, Ken Carty and Campbell Sharman, of the Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform School of Electoral Systems - they spared no effort to educate the CA (Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform) members on the need for government "stability". Japan had 30 Prime Ministers and Italy changed their government yearly since WWII ended, the Two Profs told the CA members, ostensibly expecting to raise disdain for government instability and affinity for government stability.

Paterson's statistics contrasted to those of Carty and Sharman demonstrate conclusively that, at eight premiers in 20 years, we are far ahead in government stability of either Japan or Italy. But, profs and journalists are not content that we are beating these two governmental-stability-challenged countries, they want us to do better than "eight in 20", they may want to shoot for one in 20, in the hope that we will score two in 20 or even better, like we manage to average with the other government, the one in Ms. Sheila Fraser's Ottawa.

Japan and Italy, especially Italy, is a favourite with government stability enthusiasts. Profs, columnists and other "resource persons" rely on Italy and Japan to make their case for government stability.

Regrettably, they either do not notice the effect of government stability/instability or it does not occur to them to "put two and two together" so that they may assess its effects on the society's prosperity and well-being. Had they done so, they may have dropped Italy and Japan to search for other examples of national government instability to use in their promotion of government stability.

But the advocates of government stability do not do correlations. They want us to heed their word, pity the Japanese and the Italians for their imprudence and then thank our lucky stars for enduring Mulroney and Chretien for a decade each, Trudeau for 16 years, Mackenzie King, his dog and the ghost of his mum for 22 years.

Were they to do such a correlation, it would turn out unproductive to their purpose and would spoil their neat line. For, as reality has it, both Italy and Japan, with a tiny fraction of the per capita natural resources of Canada, have created equal or a higher standard of living than natural resources filthy rich Canada. They (Japan and Italy) did as well as they have done, I will argue, not despite government instability, but because of it. It is equally easy to trace many of our failings to our government stability. Indeed, the two are closely connected.

In Italy, because of this endemic instability, the government is always on its toes - it cannot afford to become stale, it has to be responsive to the will of the electorate. The opposition, knowing that it may get another chance at the big price at anytime, do not hibernate, they stay alert. In Canada, because governments are secured by Trudeaunean "nobodies" herded about the House by Party Whips, the government is responsive to those who give them the money to buy "election" for the "nobodies" who, in turn, would cast votes in Parliament affirming faith and devotion to the government, thereby creating government stability for the glory of democracy. In Italy, the government caters more to the people but in Canada it caters more to the party sponsors, for it is through this, respectively, that governments can bid for stability.

In Italy rarely can a party govern alone and when it happens, it knows it will not be for long. Parties in coalition and minority government situations, indeed, all the parties for they rotate roles, have their say in parliament, their voices breaking up the monotony of the biggest party. Each of the many parties of Italy has the best of its package considered in governing the society. The best of "capitalism",

"socialism", even "communism" are harvested to be combined into the governing of the society.

In contrast, in British Columbia, we get Gordon Campbell who proceeds to overdose us on unbridled capitalism and to dismantle our societal home, sacrificing our well-being in the altar of his personal ideology. He can do what he wants for he is stable, for he is unshakably ballasted into the Peoples' Legislature by his army of mercenary MLAs till they expire in 2005. He would not do that in Italy, for government instability would kick in quickly to spare Italians his style of governance.

In Italy the government has to be flexible and receptive to ideas, responsive to the merit of concepts, indifferent to their ideological origin. In Canada, our stable governments are inherently rigid, taking society down the narrow chute of their ideology, rather oblivious to the Vox Populi, listening attentively to their hidden Master's Voice, serving the politicians personal interests.

Paterson declares that she "does not blame the voters", but says this after she has said that:

"B.C. voters obviously like the theory of political governance more than the reality. We elect the left only to long for the right. We vote for the hard-nosed businessmen only to dream of the soft-hearted socialists. We yearn for things to get better, and then ensure they never do by tossing out one government after another."

This is interesting stuff, not so much because it is an exhaustive analysis of our situation, but for affording us a launch-pad to begin exploring the reasons for the predicament we find ourselves in and which Paterson laments.

The voters are not to blame, I fully agree with this of Paterson's assertions. Voter innocence is a corollary to the reasons for Democracy, these reasons having been vetted valid by countless nations and individuals through a time span longer than two millennia. Under normal conditions, that is to say when information is not manipulated, the citizens make the best decision possible under any given set of circumstances (I acknowledge the existence of sophistries against that, but it would be too much of a diversion to answer them here - I will explain when the time comes).

I believe Paterson and I share a faith in democracy, but our take of the situation we refer to, may be at variance. To begin with, whether "B.C. voters obviously like the theory of political governance more than the reality" is rather immaterial, because our freedom to govern ourselves the way we prefer is much wanting - we cannot do what we like or deem to be good for us, nor can we act to spare ourselves what we dislike or fear. The politicians have seized the political system and have de-democratized it to the level that we are helpless against their dicta. It boils down to whether we like this or any other "theory" it matters little, for we cannot do much about it, because the politicians have hijacked our democracy.

Indeed, the situation Paterson laments would not occur if her assertions that "we elect the..." and "We vote for...." were valid. Regrettably they are not, indeed, they are patently false. That is to say, unless one distorts the meaning of words so far that "voting against the worst of two evils" means "exercising choice in a democratically government society." Peterson's assertion that we are "tossing out one government after another" is however correct.

Elections have been turned by the politicians into arbitrations of which of two gangs gets to be our tyrant. We voted for the Harcourt NDP because we could no longer bear the VanderZalm Socreds, even if led by Rita Johnston. We voted for the Campbell Liberals to oust the Glen Clark - Ujall Dosanjh NDP. That is the only thing we could do, we could do no more and no better than that. To oust the one we must vote for the other, no other choice is left us.

If, for the sake of government stability, we keep one of the two rival parties in power longer than we do, things will likely be worse than if we rotate the two Evils as we do. And it will be a sad day for democracy if the CA is swayed by Carty's and Sharman's affliction with "government stability" and ends up suggesting an electoral system that will heap more of it on us, more than we are already cursed with. May the Force spare us the fate of having more "government stability" brought upon us by an altered electoral system.

Let me make it clear that government stability is not necessarily bad, it can be benevolent and otherwise desirable. What is objectionable is "government stability" affected by electoral systems or otherwise artificially introduced and/or sustained.

Naturally sustained government stability is desirable. In a real democracy the government enjoys the support of the majority. This,

the support of the people, may result in government stability and this is welcome when it happens. Indeed, true democracy fosters government stability. Democracy, offers an incentive to cultivating a government's merit as a means of sustaining itself in power and discourages arbitrary governing for it results in government instability, as it must.

Conversely, if government stability is produced artificially, as it may be by a crooked electoral system, the government tends to be arbitrary. When government stability is based on having a hefty herd of Mulronean "trained seals" in the house, the government tends to govern on behalf of the sugar daddies who provide the money with which to buy elections for the "trained seals" so that they may vote seamlessly confidence in the government so that the government may enjoy "stability".

If the CA results in a proportional representation electoral system, the situation will improve to a substantial extent, albeit this benefit will be less than adequate, less than it could be and will have a hefty price tag.

Such an electoral system results in smaller majorities than that produced by the system now in force and this is all to the better from the peoples' point of view. So is the increasing possibility of "minority" governments and perhaps coalition governments. In any case and especially in the latter two instances, society will benefit by the government widening its vision to encompass more than lies at the Left and the Right margins of the ideological spectrum. This is the reason people pray for minority governments in the absence of hope for anything better.

But the improvement, noticeable as it may be, is nowhere what it could be. For the result of a proportional system does not free the MLAs from being subservient to a party. It only allows more warlords and gangs into parliament, it fosters "organized political crime". Nor does it make the government operate over the entire spectrum of possibilities, for it is unlikely the parties would cover the entire spectrum. And we must not forget "deal - making" with the possibility that it addresses "government stability" not necessarily of the proper type.

Increasing the parties from two to half a dozen, even to a dozen, is good - but better is to increase that number further. The more parties in a parliament, the wider the spectrum of options, the more choice of

solutions to a given problem are available. The less the facility of the elected tyrant to prevail over Reason. The ideal situation is to have as many parties as the members of the parliament, that is to say to have each member be his/her own party `s leader. This is tantamount to no one having a party. Like in a democracy, where the system distributes political power equally to all citizens, which is tantamount to no one having power which excludes oppression and ensures freedom. That is what it is all about.

The price we will be forced to pay is a strengthening of the party system. The relief we will get will stall the gathering of the momentum that would regain the democratic right of the citizenry to remake parliament into an assembly of citizens representatives, as it is meant to be, as must be.

I recognize the difficulties one encounters in attempting to visualize a party-free political stage. Party-ocracy is all we have experienced, it is all we know. The power of the familiar is immense. But parties were not always present, nor are they everywhere now. At the beginning of the last century, BC had no parties and Inuvik is party free, now. Moreover, the bearing parties have on the overall process of governing varies substantially from one to the other society.

It is possible to keep parties and regain democracy, substantially, if not totally. Such a great leap toward democracy can be made by excluding parties from the election process while allowing them to function within parliament. This will have the effect of removing the facility of parties to control the peoples' representatives and render parliament into parties' fiefdom.

Banning parties from the election process will result in members of parliament being elected on merit and being free of indebtedness to parties and to parties' sponsors. It will produce MLAs uncommitted to obeying the Party Whips. It will produce peoples' representatives who will not beg the party to grant them a "free vote", but who will vote freely, by right, as is proper, instead of doing so on the rare occasion the Party Whip will grant them license. Parties could no longer demand subservience by wielding the threat of denying "nominations" at the next election and otherwise ousting from parliament MLAs who may stand up for the people against the party. Then the governing party, or parties, would have to earn and maintain support of the members of parliament, of members who are peoples' representatives, of members who are no longer party mercenaries.

Apropos, as I tap out these lines, the news came (Times - Colonist, May 5, 2004) that the government in Ottawa is "on the verge of passing a law that would allow even one candidate to form a registered political party...". Please do not attribute it to politicians becoming born-again democrats. It is not Ethos, it is the Supreme Court of Canada who made them do it. Likely deliberately, the politicians timed the introduction of the Bill to die in the Order Paper, due to the calling of the impending election. Very interesting, is it not?

This is not to say that distancing the parties from the election process, would make the MLAs neither Priceless or Mother Therasas. Surely bad apples will occur in the parliament basket, it is inevitable that they do, it is indeed desirable for parliament is not to represent only the saints among us, but all of us, the whole society. But there is difference between a society where individual criminals occur and a society ravaged by organized crime. A parliament can handle or endure the occasional member who misbehaves, a parliament cannot cope with a party who misbehaves, especially if it is a dominant party. Democracy cannot survive a parliament when a party controls its members and whips them to voting confidence in the party leader, no matter what he does, no matter if he turns out to be the subject of Sheila Fraser's report.

I would like to close this article with an example of broad -visioned government. It is a story of "stable government" which although far from ideal, served British Columbia well. I am referring, of course, to the WAC Bennett 22 years of governing our Province. We all knew very well that "Wacky", as W.C. A. Bennett was known, was of the "extreme right" political persuasion. Was our perception correct?

We need not answer, for it hardly matters whether he was Tory, Liberal, Socialist or even Commie. For he was not an ideological slave, he was guided by his brain and chased whatever was good for British Columbia, everywhere it could be found. He, the super-capitalist, did not hesitate to nationalize the B.C Electric company and make it into BC Hydro. He, the far right winger, nationalized the Black Ball Navigation Company and turned it into the finest ferry system the world had seen.

Characteristically, Bennett announced the nationalization of BC Electric while the funeral of its CEO was underway. Rumors had it that "private interests" scheduled the funeral to derail the announcement, or create bad optics for Wacky. Little did they know, for Wacky, undaunted,

grabbed the radio mike and did "what he had to do for the people of British Columbia", as he put it, while the funeral was in procession.

Wacky Bennett, whatever he may have been, was many ideologies combined into one. In a sense, he represented the entire spectrum of political views of the electorate, and that contributed much to his "government stability". Had he been a doctrinarian capitalist, had he been less socialist than his opponent leader of the NDP was, he would have been replaced rather quickly. Wacky was a whole bird, a rare bird.

I rest my case.