

A Quest for a Civil Society

Preamble

This submission is a personal statement of my views concerning the state of the body politic of British Columbia. The submission is not a representation of any political party or political/social movement.

I am a Canadian who was born and has lived all his life in British Columbia. I have served in various political/social/economic organizations in British Columbia.

My greatest personal influences in life are: being the father of two young men, Yuri and Maxim, being born a Sons of Freedom Doukhobor, serving as a school trustee (18 years on the Kootenay/Columbia School District), and being, at various times in my life, a member of various political parties, (Social Credit Party(BC), New Democratic Party (BC), Conservative Party(Canada), and Liberal Party (Canada)). These influences determine my view of the British Columbia body politic.

We live in a time when “politics” is a pejorative. Our political institutions seem as a slowly sinking ship adrift on an ocean consisting of currents of general distrust, non concern, and popular ridicule of politics and politicians. As a society, we want to fix this situation, but we are not sure how to go about it.

What worries me is that we are concerning ourselves too much on how many deck chairs there are on deck and/or who has the right to sit in one of the chairs. All of this heated concern while the ship sinks into the ocean of our distempered times. What we should be concerning ourselves with is how to right the ship and how to deal with the currents that effect its path.

General Comments on the State of our Democracy

1. Myth of the “wasted vote”

There is a myth that if one casts a ballot and the choice on the ballot is not successful in the election, then we have “wasted” our vote. This is an absolutely silly view. There is something totally majestic about the fact that an ordinary individual can enter a voting booth, and in anonymity, can cast a vote yes or no for those who govern. My family experience in being of Russian ancestry and being born into a closed religious community, has led me to appreciate the majesty of the privilege of the secret ballot. It is a privilege to be able to vote quietly and with assurance that your vote will be counted. This is the true essence of the voting privilege. Ask the voters in Florida, or in Palliser

Saskatchewan for that matter, what they think about the privilege of the right to a secret ballot.

Many people in various countries (including our own during the Mackenzie/Papineau Rebellion) gave their lives for that solemn principle of voting in quiet and having that vote be counted. When we are given the right of the secret ballot and the assurance that it will be counted, not only do we win - but civil society wins! So, let us then dispense with this silly idea of a “wasted” vote just because we may not like the result of a particular election.

2. The “Rights Agenda” and Modern Democracy:

Democracy is a journey to a definition. There never was a golden age when all people’s rights and opinions were respected. Indeed, in my own lifetime, my ancestors because of their commitment not to take oaths, were denied the right of the vote. People of Asian origin, and as added irony many people of native origin, were denied the right to vote in my lifetime. Today, due to the powerful forces of social change initiated in the 1950s and 1960s, these laws have been struck down and these denials of democracy erased

We are better off now than we have ever been when it comes to the vote. So why are we so unhappy? One of the biggest reasons is the growth of the “rights agenda”.

If there ever was a time of the common agenda, it surely is not now. Politics is the art of knowing what to barter in order to acquire what you really need from what you want. This is a political art not much practised in today’s society. Be we pro- or- anti abortion, pro- or- anti gay marriage, pro- or- anti gun possession etc., we tend to think about these as our personal rights, first, middle and last

People feel that their rights have been trampled if their local MLA (especially if they have not voted for that MLA) refuses to enact legislation that fulfills their perceived personal and special “right”.

Whether we like or do not like the impact of the “rights agenda” on the body politic, it has to be recognized as a major sentiment effecting government. Further to this, the growth of industries such as the electronic networks links individuals together in ways unheard of before in history.

There must be created structures that hear and recognize the sentiments of these “rights” dissenters in our society. We need to build a political system that consciously hears dissent and recognizes it, instead of leaving this dissent to just fester in the streets (and in the corporate boardrooms). Society would be better served to have this dissent as part of its body politic.

3. Pop Culture and Modern Politics:

We live in an era where Andy Warhol is Solon. We need our personal fame, we need our consumption, we need our quick and simple answers to perplexing social issues. We have, through the means of our pop media culture, become much more a reactive society than an analytic one. A world in which form fashions function. The Governator in Kalli-For-Na is no accident of history. Great stuff, indeed!!!!

Serious politics demands serious attention and serious thought. As a society, we need to create a counterweight to the effects of the rights agenda and pop culture politics on our political institutions. This counterweight is the creation of an empowered effective citizenry - a civil society.

The Quest for a Civil Society

John Ralston Saul in his book Voltaire's Bastards (a must-read tome for anyone interested in the practice and evolution of government) lays out clearly the description of our modern society. We are a society that, not only hires our bureaucrats, but also elects its leaders from the ranks of those skilled at being courtiers. We expect our leaders to tell us what we want. As an example, "I will never sell BC Rail", "collective agreements will not be broken", "school tuition will be protected", etc, etc, etc,....etc. All of this is accomplished by use of "spinning" words like partnership, sacred trust, common sense etc. (Through these examples, I am not just highlighting our present provincial government; the same is true, to some degree, with all governments).

Saul's answer to the problems in society is literacy. I agree with him and I further expand the idea of literacy to the areas of governance and politics. Literacy in terms of politics is the creation of an empowered effective citizenry. We need, as a society, to focus on political literacy in our public schools just as we do on reading literacy and literacy with numbers. A politically literate individual is an empowered effective citizen.

It is important to remember that democracy is an evolving definition, a journey or quest of sorts. Where we want to be is at a place that is called the civil society. It is a society that empowers and engages its citizens in the law-making process.

The often quoted solution to empowering citizens is the proportional vote. I think we should carefully think about this idea. To borrow the over-used analogue about the Titanic, this can be just playing with the deck chairs. Although proportional representation will give some voice in the Legislative Assembly to those who at present do not have it, as it concerns increasing participation and empowerment of the citizen, the net effect can just as easily be more of the same++ plus plus. Further to this, if there is an urban Vancouverite party (as an example) and it attains 60% of the vote in Vancouver City then that party, through strict proportional representation, gets representation in the Legislative Assembly that is way out of proportion to the other ridings in the province. I

know there are many vote transfer system etc, but no matter what system is adopted there are other concerns (ie urban versus rural issues). After a while, all of these concerns to ensure various definitions of proportionality will become like the Ptolemaic System, a complex system of governors that is again unsatisfactory in the eyes of many.

What we have to do is to “think outside the booth”. Simply changing how we elect the MLA does not redefine or expand the interface between the citizens and their government.

The first thing to remember is that Parliament is the baby in the discontented political bathwater of our times. The principle of the supremacy of Parliament should not be effected by our search for representation. We need to invent a new structure that does not effect this principle while offering a new way for the citizen to have representation in the formation of laws.

The road to a civil society is built by institutions of representation, by practical examples of people-government, and by a concerted and constant effort at educating for an empowered effective citizenry. That is no small task, but then governance is no small issue.

Recommendations:

1. **Creation of a Representative Assembly**

What I propose as a solution to the fact that on a consistent basis the citizen is left out of the political process (politics is not just the occasional visit to the polling booth) is the creation of a separate body, which I call, the Representative Assembly.

This Assembly will be appointed by the registered political parties who attain a certain level of public support (ie say 4% of the popular vote allows for one member to be appointed). This Assembly should be appointed so that it represents the voice of the political party that received a certain level of public support during an election.

The purpose of the Representative Assembly will be to review legislation from the Legislative Assembly. Where a majority can be reached on a portion or the whole of a bill, the Representative Assembly will recommend amendments to the bill and send it back to the Legislative Assembly. The Legislative Assembly will retain the final authority to pass the bill in whatever form that it decides.

The Representative Assembly shall have the authority (within a prescribed period) to hold public hearing as part of its deliberations assessing the effect of proposed legislation from the Legislative Assembly. This will ensure public hearings on the proposed legislation. This engagement of the public in the law-making process is what is vital in a

civil society. Protest and dissent thus forms a part of government. Through this process, the citizen will receive the empowerment to be heard and be a part of the law-making process. Political parties will also be more inclined find new views when enacting legislation.

I would suggest that is that the Representative Assembly be appointed by the political parties. The reason for this is two-fold. I do not see that adding more MLA's or electing a separate chamber, that acts as another Parliament, will do anything to improve substantially the representation of the citizen. Further to this is the idea that the primary reason of the creation of the Representative Assembly is to build an institution that acts as an ongoing interface between government and the citizenry. It is the place of seeking new views about legislation and empowering the citizenry with how government works. It further allows the engaged citizen to form networks concerning social issues within and outside of government.

I believe the Legislative Assembly should be left as it is. I do not have a problem with the first past the post method of electing MLAs. As one who has been a member of various political parties and has sat on numerous times in the visitors gallery of the Legislative Assembly, I have rarely been politically engaged by either of these activities. How you elect and who sits in the Legislative Assembly is of noncrucial consequence to the ongoing process of engaging and empowering the citizen. Some are deeply effected by the election results. I am not on of those. What is important to me is the role that the citizens can play in their communities be they local, provincial or federal. The best in our political system happens because aware engaged individuals. What is vital is to better connect them to government. Now that would be real political change. That would be a civil society.

2. Public Funding of the Activities of Political Parties in British Columbia:

British Columbia should fund the activities of its political parties in proportion to how much of the popular vote they receive (ie say \$4.00/vote at a certain level of support, say if 4% of the popular vote is attained by that party).

Parliament evolved as a counterweight to the "divine right to rule". If you were of noble birth, you were divinely chosen to rule. Today we have a similar situation - the "golden rule to rule". If you have the gold - you rule!

Money is the key access to power because of the huge expenses incurred during an election campaign in the modern era of multi-medias. Anyone who has been a member of a political party knows how much it costs to run an election and how much fund-raising activity (or quiet co-option) is necessary to raise political funds. For civil society to operate effectively, this gold field must be mined of some of its non conformities.

3. **Analysis of the Operations of the British Columbia Citizen's Assembly**

I believe that there should be undertaken a complete analysis which deals with the operations of the British Columbia Citizen's Assembly.

Whatever one feels about the present government of British Columbia, this government can only be lauded for creating the Citizen's Assembly. The Citizen's Assembly proceedings are crucial to the concept of a civil society. I can think of only two other citizen's forums which have such a profound example for government in an information society. They are the South African Reconciliation Commission and Czech and Slovak Commission.

The world is full of examples of "power grows out of the barrel of a gun". There are so few examples of "wisdom in governance grows out of the thoughtful deliberations of a whole people". Your deliberations are an example to others of this rare principle in the evolution of democracy and politics in general.

There should be a primer on people-government which chronicles the Citizen's Assembly: its operations, its commitment to a search for governance in an evolving information age society, and how the Citizen's Assembly deliberations help to determine the way a government can ultimately re-make itself.

I believe that members of your Assembly, along with government representatives and other individuals deeply concerned with government and its structures in an information age society should record and produce a full analysis of the operations of the British Columbia Citizen's Assembly as an example of governance change for other jurisdictions.

4. **Creation of a Mandatory Civil Society Curriculum for the Graduation Requirement in the British Columbia Public School System.**

There should be created a mandatory Civil Society Curriculum for the graduation program in the public education system.

As a long time school trustee in the British Columbia public education system, I have been deeply and for many years concerned about the lack of systematic training in civil literacy in our public school system. I am supportive of the efforts by our public school system to increase the levels of literacy, numeracy, social skills development, and recognition of personal esteem. What I find crucially lacking is the deliver of a solid foundation of literacy in the nature of our democratic society - how it operates and how to become engaged in it - to our youth, the true and only future, of our province.

I have taken my sons to New Denver and shown them where our family would gather to have the monthly visit with my brother who was incarcerated behind a wire fence in the

Doukhobor school at New Denver. I further showed them the Japanese Centre in New Denver which was built as a memorial to what happened to the Canadians of Japanese origin when laws were so callously passed by the governments of the day. These things are made much easier when people feel they have no ability to change what has happened.

When I recommend a literacy in governance, I do not suggest the creation of the “we are better than you” curriculum that initiated the many public school building renovation project on the part of my ancestors throughout the Kootenays region. What I suggest is the creation of a curriculum that explains the role of the citizen in a civil society. A practical curriculum that gives students the knowledge and value of volunteerism and other activities that serves the public good in society. A curriculum that explains and models politics not as a purely adversarial system, but as a search for a common agenda in our communities and our province.

As a school trustee, I have seen the value of this province’s public education system and the dedication of those involved in teaching, administering and guiding the BC public education system. I have come to greatly respect many of those who work in this system. I also realize that many of these individuals presently do, in valued bits and pieces, what I advocate on a systematic level. I believe that their efforts should be harnessed to create a governance curriculum for the future of our youth and this province.

It makes no sense to me that we educate our children to have various literacy and skills on how to be effective producers/consumers in society, while at the same time we deny them the necessary education to learn the literacy and skills that produces wise governors of that society.

As is evident to you, this is a highly personal submission concerning my views on the state of democracy in our province. I have an anecdote to illustrate my concerns. Last month we celebrated the landings on the moon. My father and I shared a beer and watched the proceedings on the television at the time of the lunar landing. My grandmother entered the room and asked what we were doing. My father explained to her what we were watching. She looked at us and called us a couple of fools for watching what was to her obviously just another program with actors. In her view of the cosmos, if God had meant for men to be on the moon, He would have given them wings.

My grandmother had reached her capacity to comprehend and accept rapid change in our world. She had mentally retreated into the 19th century. In father’s life time the changes were even more rapid than in my grandmother’s time. In my life time change is speedier still. In the life times of my sons, change is coming lightning fast.

The effect that the human race has on its future and on the future of our planet has also been magnified many fold. My grandmother came from the age of World War One. Today, we have weapons that can destroy all civilization, further to that, we are committing acts that could destroy the complex web of life on our planet

With this rapid change it is crucial that we develop governance systems that prepare the new generations with the institution and the literacy and skills to deal with our complex and rapidly changing world. We need to rethink our governance institution and how they connect to the citizenry. We must attempt to ensure that there are structures and processes which encourage the advancement of the best thinking of all of us when it comes to governing our society. This is a very tall order!

In closing, I wish all of you well in your deliberations over the next few months. Good luck and appreciate the crucial value of your work.

Respectfully submitted,

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