

ACCOUNTABILITY - THE BIG MYTH

On June the 27th, past, I posted on Alcyone News Article 24 in this series, "Accountability". In it I refute the myth of political accountability reputedly afforded us by the electoral system currently in force. Most disturbing has been the endless chanting of the accountability mantra by the Profs at the CA Boot Camp and in other venues.

When a myth is spread by U-Prof's it tends to acquire dimensions of credibility, not always deserved. One false belief flows from another and, in this instance, we come to believe that we are in control of the politicians. Politicians are scared to bits of us, the Profs would have us believe, and strive to avert our ire. Accountability keeps politicians on the straight and narrow and politics clean, all to the good governance of the society. Humbug!

It is essential that we differentiate between what we may call "political accountability" and "legal accountability". The former refers to the decision politicians make on behalf of the citizenry. Such as to give Bombardier grants and loans, to sell BC Hydro, to cut taxes. The "legal accountability" category covers the range from petty crime to sleaze, such as padding expense accounts, taking bribes from government contractors, and so on. The former is answerable to the citizenry, the latter to the police.

To misbehave is human, and it would be unwise to wish for governance by persons who have lost their humanity. Indeed a wise society would not want to be governed by saints and it is certain ours will not. Politicians will keep some police busy, like other classes of people do. "Legal accountability" is, therefore, of no concern here, we should leave it the police, it is their worry, we need not add it to ours.

"Political accountability" is different. It refers to the making of political decisions, irrespective of whether they are made in bad faith. It covers also mismanagement of public affairs due to ineptitude, procrastination, ideological orientation or other human failings. These do not come under the jurisdiction of law enforcement.

We need no means to hold “accountable” the politicians, at least the ones who are in government. One reason is that it is virtually impossible to make politicians make things right. Punishment as a revenge is improper and punishment of politicians for paradigm is ineffectual in all instances and even more so in averting political ineptitude. I will argue that “accountability” after the fact is alien to democracy.

This is not to say that I advocate politicians be given free range to do as they please - nothing of the sort. Indeed, politicians in a position to hurt society, should be put on a short leash, so to speak. But before going further along that line of reasoning, we need to heed the advice of the old minister of finance who advised us to be “realistic and pragmatic”.

It is essential that we come to terms with the job we assign to politicians. We call upon them to govern a society of millions of citizens and, in the process, make decisions of immense consequence to us all. Perhaps this is too much to ask, for it is larger than life, so to speak and it would be wise to make it easier than it presently is for politicians, but that is another story.

Then there are other considerations. Because of the magnitude of the matters they handle, it is unrealistic to even attempt to make politicians correct their errors.

Consider, for example, the Pussyficat Catamaran Ferries fiasco. One cannot possibly make Mike Harcourt, Glen Clark or the NDP pay for their inept approach to ferry-building. Nor could one get Gordon Campbell to compensate British Columbians for his folly in giving the Pussyficats away.

Nor could one take Kim Campbell and Jean Chretien and make them pay for the Helicopter fiasco. (She signed a contract committing Canada to buy military helicopters on the eve on the election she knew she would lose. She also knew that nothing serious would happen if she had left the helicopter decision for Chretien to make after the election. Chretien played Kim’s choppers on the election trail, “*zero helicopters*” he cried everywhere. Then he cancelled the deal at a substantial cost to Canada, some \$500 Million down the drain). Either one or both of them could have been acting in bad or good faith, but this does not matter here. What is pertinent to our discourse is that both did a great disservice to Canada and there is no way for us to recover the \$500 Million from Kim or Jean.

Things being as they are, it makes no sense to expect the politicians to make such large scale decisions and, at the same time, subject them to fear of punishment if it turns out that they made the wrong move. To do that is patently counterproductive, for a society cannot go forward lead by “leaders” consumed by fear. We must let those we put at the helm to perform their task free of fear, certain that their course of action meets the approval of the society, certain that they have the people on their side.

Incurable diseases may be preventable. Then, while an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure in routine transactions of “ordinary Canadians”, in the case of political dealing, an ounce of prevention is worth tonnes of cure. In this then we have the answer and it is simple: It is to stop cold in their tracks politicians contemplating actions against the best interests of the society. If they are called to order when they

take the wrong course, they would not generate causes to account for. Such arrangement is possible, is known, it is called "democracy".

Democracy is a complete system. It is a simple, natural, self contained system of governance. It recognizes human failings and has built-in mechanisms to compensate for them.

A wise society, democratically governed, assumes collectively the responsibility for the inadvertent imperfect conduct of the people it places in charge of public affairs.

"Democratically governed" is the key notion in the above assertion, because in a democracy it is the people make the decisions and, therefore, it is they who are accountable. In contrast, under tyranny, it is the tyrant who makes the decisions and the people should bear no responsibility for the tyrants' doings for it is improper to hold people responsible for effects they did not cause. Incidentally, that a tyrant may be "elected" does not detract from the validity of the assertion. Accordingly, for the responsibility taken to be assumed by the society at large, the decision making must be shared - hence the precondition of "democratically governed".

There are four levels of responsibility associated with democratic government, five in the instance of the Government of Canada, without counting the Queen's representative and the Deity:

- * At one end of the accountability chain is the Bureaucracy. They make decisions of their own and execute orders from the government. They are controlled, or supposed to be, by the government. There are no threads of accountability or command to the bureaucracy by-passing the government and so it must be.
- * Next to Bureaucracy is the Government. They make decisions of substantial significance, administer the law, control the bureaucracy and otherwise implement the instructions issued them by the parliament. The government is appointed by parliament, serves at its pleasure and is controlled by it. Yes, in a democracy it does.
- * Then there is the Parliament. It is an assembly of peoples' representatives, who, on behalf of and on instruction by the citizenry, make laws and decisions of great significance to the well-being of the society. Parliament appoints and controls the government. The government is at all times serving at the pleasure of parliament and is subject to being replaced at any moment, as Parliament may wish.
- * At the federal level of Canada there is the Senate and a similar House is found in other jurisdictions, but not in the Canadian provinces. The Senate is best described as a reviewer of the action of Parliament, as the source of a "second opinion" on what Parliament decides. Parliament is not really answerable to the Senate, in the strict meaning of the word. Perhaps the role of the Senate should change or the senate be abolished, but that is another story.
- * On in the other end of the chain are the people. They are the ultimate authority in the society. U-Pros and even Lawyers, speak about parliament being "sovereign" but such assertions are pure gobbledegook - parliament is composed of peoples' representatives and in this type of relationship, it is not the representative in command, it is the represented, instead. It is the people who

are the makers of parliament, and it is the people who are sovereign, by definition if you like, for they are the “demos” in democracy.

Notably, there are issues a society may face which are of bigger consequence than what any reasonable people may delegate to their representatives. One example was “Meech Lake” which rightly was brought to the people to decide in a referendum. The Canadian Constitution Act was not brought to the people but it should have been and it must be, at some time, consented to by the people. Pertinent is that there are issues beyond the authority of parliament and these, in the absence of any better authority, must be decided by the people pooling their wisdom. Hence referenda and other means provided by democracy enable people to decide such large issues.

Perhaps one may argue that in the representative form of democracy, parliament, collectively considered, is indeed sovereign - for it represents the people. However, individually members of parliament are deemed fallible, like the rest of us, for they are of us, for they must be of us. And they serve at the pleasure of their constituents which means that the constituents control their representative. To this I shall return shortly.

The level of authority delegated to each entity in the governance chain is, or ought to be, defined in the constitution. It is the Constitution that governs the flow of control in the chain of institutions comprising the overall government of the society.

This order is dictated by realities. Parliament is immediate to the government and so is the government to the bureaucracy. It is impossible to examine and control the universe; what is feasible is to work within a manageable jurisdiction. Those who appoint others and mandate them to perform certain tasks are likely best suited to control the appointees and monitor their performance. Intrusion into a chain of command by others is counterproductive at best, catastrophic at worst.

It is the job of the peoples’ representatives to keep seamless vigilance on the government and to act as expeditiously as circumstances may require to stop the government cold in their tracks, before they hurt society. This the people cannot possibly do by themselves, they can only do it through their representatives in parliament.

Political parties exist to reverse the natural flow of “accountability”. By controlling the members of parliament, the party shields its subsidiary, the government and its appointed “elected tyrant” against being meaningfully controlled by parliament and made to act, or to act always, on behalf of the people. Parties neuter parliament and thus allow the implementation of hidden agendas and the governance of the society in a fashion other than democratic. It reverses the order of command, if you prefer, it turns the flow of “accountability” upside-down, it puts the bandits in control of the police.

Incidentally, all despots are front-persons of some minority, therefore “despot” or “tyrant” or “dictator” are inclusive of the minority they represent. Or so I say, after Lewis Carroll: *“When I use a word, Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, ‘it means just what I chose it to mean - neither more nor less’.*

If parliament is, as it is meant to be, in charge of the government, there is no need to hold the government accountable directly to the electorate. Indeed, to do so

would be not merely superfluous, it would be counterproductive. No need to devise calamities to bring down upon errant or sinister politicians, nothing of the sort is needed.

Peoples representatives serve at the pleasure of whom they represent. And while representatives are nominally elected for a certain, pre-determined, interval, the people retain the right to recall their representatives at any time and replace them with others, more to their liking. There must be no "job security" for peoples representatives, for the moment the represented lose confidence in their representative, the representative is no longer, he/she metamorphoses to somebody else. Just like the representatives have the right to recall the government they appoint, so do the people have the right to recall those whom they appoint to represent them in parliament. That is the food chain, or the chain of command, as you may prefer.

It is a fundamental tenet of democracy that people never be asked to explain their vote. It is a corollary to this that people never be asked to explain the reason they may recall whom they appointed to represent them. The people may then "recall" their representative as it pleases them.

Arguably, "recalled" representatives may have a right to be compensated for the pay they lose for not being allowed to serve out their term. This because they are not dismissed "with cause". But so be it and no more.

Through "Recall", which is the legislative means through which people may exercise their right to recall their representatives and the right to instigate legislation, the citizens ensure that their representatives act efficiently and honestly in ensuring the good governance of the society.

Of course we know of the Recall & Initiative Act presently on the books. This is pure placebo, it is cosmetic patchwork only, enacted by the NDP, Ujjal Dosanjh composing it. Under Dosanjh's baton, the NDP trampled the peoples' will as fiercely as Stomping Tom Connors tramples plywood. The Dosanjh R & I Act flies in the face of Democracy.

For the way the politicians suppressed the Vox populi please see my book, (co-authored) "RECALL AND INITIATIVE - The Quest for Democracy in British Columbia" - Alcyone Books.

Significantly, had we had meaningful R&I Law, we would not need Gordon Campbell to "allow" us to reform the electoral system - we could initiate it on our own. And so we could proceed to democratize the rest of the political system and ensure that we the citizens are self-governing our society. For precisely these reasons politicians denied our will for Recall and Initiative.

The Profs informed the CA, and the rest of us I may add, that some 8 out of 10 Canadians want their representatives in parliament not to vote the "party line". And that an equally strong majority support "free votes" in parliament, such votes being a slight relief from the party stranglehold on parliament. Indeed, so strong is it the peoples will for the demise of the party and its Whip, that politicians routinely make election promises to "allow" free votes to our "representatives". After the election, the promise is conveniently ignored for the elected tyrants would not trust even their own mercenaries without having the Party Whip cracking above their heads.

It is all academic gobbledegook, there is no meaningful political accountability in our system of government, it is only an illusion, skilfully orchestrated to take the wind out of the sails of the vibrant element of the society who seek to democratize the political system. Its only utility is in easing the pains we endure due to party-o-cracy.

To sum it all up, "accountability" as it exists or as it may be, cannot make party-o-cracy palatable. Adding "accountability" to party-o-cracy, would never make it an acceptable substitute for Democracy.

Let's reject "accountability", let us say to those who use it to make us endure "elected tyranny": Thanks, but No thanks! We may even forgive the CA Profs for speaking their minds, formed in ivory towers, distanced from reality, for misleading us into believing we are in control. We may even forgive CBC's Peter Mansbridge for having us worried that the "minority" Martin Government may experience difficulties in "controlling" our, the peoples' "parliament."

All I am saying is give real Democracy a chance.

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