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THE TYRANNY OF THE MAJORITY

It has been written lately that our common concern about the divide between East and West in Canada, or between Quebec and the rest of the Provinces is not the most significant division in today's Canada; it is the divide between the URBAN and RURAL communities that has become the most vexing and most difficult to address as the cities become larger and larger with the rural people moving to the cities along with most of our immigrants. The cold fact is that the more depopulated these rural areas become, the more dependent the cities are on these areas to feed, clothe, house and supply their people with the wherewithal to live a normal existence. So what of our current electoral system throughout Canada, the more indispensable our rural people become, the less say they have as to how they are governed.

Does one vote, counted equally throughout the various ridings, urban and rural, as most are now constituted, equate to equal representation for our rural people in our parliaments and legislatures? All one has to do is to look at the current federal election. The Cariboo riding has been eliminated while the number of federal ridings in B.C. has been increased as our total population increases. As it is now dictated, Prince George "East" (P.G- Peace River), and PG. "West" (Skeena Bulkley Valley) electoral districts now encompass what is essentially the Northern half of our province. Most of the additional ridings went to the lower Mainland, or were reflected in the redistribution there. One could guess two ridings in Vancouver's West End and near by, could be walked around by just ONE MP in an hour or so. Compared to Northern B.C., how could this be considered equal representation in our "representative democracy" regardless whether or not each represent the same number of voters?

But, this does not apply equally all across Canada as P.E.I. has 4 federal members with a total voting population less than that of one of the Northern ridings and Quebec has 75 ridings which is dictated, not by population but was determined at Confederation and is, apparently, unchangeable. We have also one member each in Nunavut, N.W.T. and Yukon, with a total population that would barely meet that of one of our Northern ridings. If these "standards" cannot be applied equally across Canada because of Confederation, why must they be applied just because they can be? As for the three Northern Territories, one more representative in each one would not be "unfair" if it gave better representation to the people. But should not the same flexibility apply to all the provinces with under-populated Northern areas as well as to Manitoba and Saskatchewan as a whole, as they are becoming ever more marginalized in their federal representation in their shrinking numbers but are ever more essential to feed the rest of Canada?

This is, of course, a Federal matter but it also applies here as that Rural/Urban divide occurs equally within B.C. Should not this unequal division of representation in our Legislature from

our rural areas also be part of this electoral review? In the past, with the now cancelled Atlin riding as an example, we must have had more flexibility in determining riding boundaries than appears to be possible with our Federal ones. In reviewing the information sent to me from your earlier hearings, the possible diminishing of rural “power” in our Legislature as a result of this electoral review has others from the rural areas concerned, and rightly so. In reality, a proportional electoral system will, under some conditions, transfer total legislative power away from the rural areas to the Lower Mainland and Victoria solely, because of population density. Even a partial proportional system, with one-half or even one third of the “seats” being elected that way, with the other candidates elected from ridings, could also seriously diminish the already limited representation of the rural people. I realize your organization already recognizes that eventuality but is not, at this time, proposing any electoral systems and hence, do not address this lack of equality of representation in our government. It should be obvious to everyone that there will be no electoral system that can be devised that will please everyone.

It is apparent to me, however, that the lopsided victory of the last Liberal election seems to have sparked this electoral reform effort but, for some reason there appears to have been less demand for electoral reform following the election before when the NDP formed a majority government with fewer votes than the Liberals. And although this current government has a huge majority in the Legislature, not a particularly desirable situation, nevertheless the NDP were rejected massively across almost the entire province with more than 50 percent of the total votes for the Liberals! I give Premier Campbell great credit for initiating this review, when it may result in an electoral system that is to his disadvantage in the future, but one has to question why the previous election that, in reality, thwarted the will of the majority, did not engender much concern as to “fairness”. With so much controversy and concern as to the best electoral system for B.C., this review may settle some matters but could also raise others; that we are all destined to find out.

My concern regarding what is “equality” in our electoral systems which is presently determined solely or primarily by population numbers, is moving influence in our governments away from the rural people and into those from the cities. If we had a homogeneous population that would not be too serious, but we don’t. In fact urban people in B.C. are becoming ever more isolated from the reality of our natural world and it is reflected in their attitude to our resource industries. If one thinks about Alberta and the two principal cities of Calgary and Edmonton, it is virtually impossible for the city dwellers not to be aware of the importance of their agricultural and oil industries to their economy, just as it would be in Saskatchewan with Regina and Saskatoon more or less in the middle of all this resource activity. But B.C. is very different, Vancouver, the Lower Mainland, and our capital and government centre in Victoria are all in the south western corner of our province and isolated from the rest of B.C. I would have to believe that many in the Lower Mainland are more familiar with life in Washington and Oregon than they are with the rest of B.C. that is “behind” various mountain ranges. It is this isolation and the activities of the many environmental organizations centred there that can influence the people’s view of our natural world and our resource industry’s impact, real or false, on these “irreplaceable” ecosystems.

This misunderstanding of resource development, forestry and mining in particular, could severely restrict development if the ill informed urban people were given veto power over such

development through revisions to B.C.'s electoral system. Disappointingly, some of this misunderstanding of our natural world originates in our academic institutions. May I repeat and emphasize, the electoral reforms your organization proposes must not result in a further disenfranchisement of our rural people.

Just a few words about the problem of the younger people not voting in these elections. I know there are billions of people on this planet who would risk their lives to obtain that right! I've been to Laos with their Communist government; to Hong Kong where the Chinese government is thwarting the people's right to free elections; to Quaddafi's Libya; to Iran under the Shah and now under a theocracy, and to Chile under Pinochet; and sadly to Zimbabwe that was already showing signs that true democracy was on the wane; and our young don't want to vote?!! And this just after the D-Day memorial where hundreds of Canadians died trying to defeat Hitler and save our right to vote! With this attitude they dishonour these veterans and particularly those that died! I believe they should be kicked solidly in their derrieres, not accommodated with a specially modified electoral system.

And now to the end where your proposal or proposals are mandated to be voted on in a province wide plebiscite. I have no idea at this time as to what you will be recommending, but there is the possibility that your proposal could be rejected overwhelmingly by the rural voters but passed with a comfortable margin by the urban people. I trust it will not happen but would such a result be the triumph of democracy or would it really be the tyranny of the majority over the minority?

Thank you

Victor M. Young

NOTES:

This written presentation may differ somewhat from my verbal one, which you have recorded, but I do not believe in a significant way.

I learned during the discussions following my presentation that the referendum must pass, if I remember correctly, with a 60 percent majority from 60 percent of the ridings. This will require the rejection of at least 32 ridings to be defeated. Although it may be somewhat difficult to define exactly what represents a "rural" riding, nevertheless, 25 to 30 rejections could represent the overwhelming "wishes" of the rural people! WHAT THEN??

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