

## Mandating the Politicians

The English philosopher-politician Edmund Burke said countless clever things. One bit of his wisdom is widely known, likely more than any other, and this not because it is his best, but because politicians routinely utilize it to rationalize arbitrary behaviour. The quote is:

*"Your representative (in parliament) owes you, not his industry only, but judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion."*

Does it make sense? Is this satisfactory, the way it should be? Is it that the citizenry should have no say in the governing of the society other than scratching an "X" on the occasional ballot? Voting done, must we revert to political hibernation leaving the politicians to do unfettered governing upon us?

This Burke's quote is a recipe for disaster. To heed it is to give politicians carte blanche to manage our lives and to shape our future as it may please them, it is to sign them blank cheques, if you will. And this while a Tommy Douglas and a Stanley Knowles are rare occurrences, "anomalies" on the political canvas. Commonly, politicians' wisdom and ethical stature are modest rather than extraordinary, they often pale when contrasted to their aggressiveness, egotism, ambition and other non-benevolent attributes. And, of course, their susceptibility to power corruption is very high. Regrettably, the electoral system bestows neither wisdom nor ethos, only power.

Considering the enormity of government power in our "democratically" governed society, politicians in control of it can be very dangerous. Even if acting in good faith, they may hurt very much, many people. Indeed, the harm politicians may cause and the damage they may do while in office is enormous, the consequences of their actions are fathomless and potentially long lasting, sometimes irreversible. It is inconceivable, therefore, that sane people, even if of modest intelligence, would, while sober, submit to being "governed" at the "judgment" of politicians.

But even if politicians were fountainheads of wisdom and pillars of ethos, people would not willingly resign their fate on them. The wisdom of the few does not always harmonize with the desires and the needs of the many. We are free people and we want no one to rule us, we want, instead, to govern ourselves. For it is better to make

mistakes than to be ruled by "infallible" politicians, or be delivered by some "saviours". That is why we revere democracy.

Manifesting further to that we need mandate the politicians is that we do seek to mandate them. We attempt it when the politicians come into election heat and allow us their ears. This intercourse generates streams of oral election promises which, as of late, the politicians consolidate into "Red Books", seeking to mitigate for their endemically low credibility. Such a red book is the New Era Commitments published by the Campbell Liberal Party in anticipation of the 2001 election and which included the commitment to create the CA.

At other than pre-election times, we attempt to mandate politicians by marching to the Courthouse Square, beating drums, writing letters to the editor and to our MLAs and MPs, backing our requests with threats to vote for Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition. Such attempts are mostly inconsequential, at least other than to relieve our frustrations. More fruitful are the professional lobbyists who successfully "mandate" the politicians continuously on behalf of their clients, usually against the interests of the people.

Pertinent to this essay is whether mandating the politicians appertains to the electoral system. As noted, we do "mandate", or attempt to mandate, the politicians while they traverse the campaign trail, but this does not necessarily make either the location or the timing correct, optimum or exclusive. It is my thesis that, in a democracy, the mandating of politicians is a continuous process, for politicians must never lose touch with the people they represent. But, "always" includes election campaign periods and therefore, a good electoral system must contain means of mandating those who get elected. But it must be done better than the current practice.

Let us look at the current practice. Things being as they are, politicians gauge the likes and dislikes of the people and make "election promises" crafted expressly to exploit the public mood without compromising the politicians' plans. This of course, is conducive to lying and contributes to the other causes that drive politicians to their trademark insincerity.

We "elected" Brian Mulroney on his solid promise that he would do no trade or truck with the Yankees and Jean Chretien on his solemn promise to repel Mulroney's GST. We know what they did, although we may never know whether they were lying during the campaign, or changed their minds afterward.

A shining example of exploiting the public mood is found in the 1991 BC general election which had the Recall and Initiative referendum piggy-backed on to it. The electorate were determined to oust the then governing Socreds party, which meant "electing" the NDP. The electorate were also determined to vote for Recall and Initiative and this despite it being proposed by the Socreds and strongly disliked by the New "Democratic" Party.

As the campaign began, it became evident British Columbians were more concerned with securing Recall and Initiative than they were willing to vote NDP so as to oust the Socreds. Sensing the public mood and fearing the worse, the NDP dropped their opposition to the Referendum and committed themselves to abide by the result.

In round figures, the Recall and Initiative referendum vote came in 10% against, 10% spoiled ballots and an unprecedented, whopping 80% YES. On that same day's balloting, only 40% of the voters voted NDP, about half of them being the NDP "core vote", the other half voting to oust the Socreds.

I do not know if Harcourt made the promise to abide by the result of the referendum in bad faith, or whether he meant to keep it. However, while in power, the Harcourt NDP produced a placebo Recall and Initiative Act, a piece of cosmetic reform, expressly crafted to create the impression that they faithfully honoured their mandate to implement the Referendum result. In his 2003 Report on the subject, Mr. Harry Neufeld, the BC Chief Electoral Officer, verifies that the NDP Recall and Initiative Act has a full 100% rate of failure...

In short, the prevailing practice of mandating politicians is to let them make loosely worded promises and commitments and assembling them into "electoral platforms." At the end of the election day, the party who gets elected is deemed to have a mandate from the electorate to implement its entire platform.

This is a thoroughly deficient arrangement. It serves well politicians bent on fooling as many people, for as long as necessary to propel them past the election finishing line. Thereafter, the "platform" comes handy for "explaining" arbitrary behaviour by presenting as being part of their "mandate" by linking it to some innocuous election promise. Surely this is no way for the electorate to mandate their representatives in the society's parliament.

To begin with, more often than not, a party gains power with a minority of the votes. This may very well be because the majority objects to the platform of that party. Where is the mandate?

Another reality is that often, especially in instances of government change, people vote against the party in power, not for the party who get "elected". The Harcourt NDP and the Campbell Liberals were not elected, they ascended to power because the voters wanted to oust the VanderZalm Socreds and the Glen Clark NDP, respectively. Surely we did not vote Harcourt in 1991 or Campbell in 2001 because we were salivating for what they said they would do for us, we simply voted for them because doing so was the only way to get rid of their immediate predecessors. In such elections, the party platform plays an insignificant role, if any at all.

Imagine what would have happened in 1991 if the Recall and Initiative was in the Socred Platform, instead of being on the referendum. We could very well have re-elected the Socreds to secure Recall and Initiative, despite our aversion to being governed by them. Or, we could have voted to dispose of the Socreds in which case the 40% NDP would have claimed that British Columbians rejected Recall and Initiative by defeating the Socreds. It is only because we had the referendum that we know that over 80% of British Columbians want democratic empowerment.

Then there is the "party fan" aspect of the system. Some people have been skillfully conditioned over time, often through generations, to become political party "fans", in parallel to sport team fans. Party fans may not even bother looking at their party's platform, they would cheer for the party no matter what, their minds being perennially made up. However, although some fans may hold the view that their party can do no wrong, most, I would guess, would like to mandate their representatives. Were they to have the opportunity to instruct their MLAs separately from voting them in, they would likely make known their likes and dislikes.

When people are forced to pick a party platform, they are forced to take a package. They may agree with some of the contents and they may dislike others, but their likes and dislikes must be suppressed to make room for the whole platform package, the good, the bad and the indifferent in it. Forcing the electorate to pick from platform menus is tantamount to suppressing freedom of choice, which means subverting democracy.

Were we to accept the politicians' assertions to having a "mandate" to do the unpopular items they sneaked by the election in their platform box, then we must recognize that such a "mandate" is stolen from the people and those who claim it are thieves of the public trust. Stolen mandates are alien to democracy and so are thieves.

Another consequential drawback to the system is that it downgrades the election of citizens' representatives to parliament to some level below judging that pageant of heavily attractively maquillaged party platforms. But the purpose of elections is to elect representatives, for if it was to elect party platforms, they should be on the ballot instead of candidates.

This corruption of the electoral process forces voters who like one party's platform or who want to protect themselves against the platform of another party, to vote accordingly, that is to say, without regard to the respective candidates' merit. This results in the caliber of peoples' "representatives" who Trudeau called "nobodies", Mulroney "trained seals" and the folks call "rubberstamps". Burke, were he here to observe this system, would surely regret authoring the most famous of his quotations.

At this point perhaps I should address the ""leave it to the market"" sophistry. According to it, fiercely competing politicians will cater to peoples' wishes, for if they do not, their opponents will and win. Hence, whatever is desirable or necessary will figure prominently in the electoral platforms. Well, it ain't necessarily so.

Politicians share a strong desire for power, that is why, for example, the Socreds would not introduce Recall and Initiative till they were on their political deathbed and accordingly certain that they would neither be recalled nor be made to enact legislation against their will. Prior to that, they shared with the NDP the aversion to democratically empowering the people, and that is why neither of them would put Recall and Initiative in their platforms despite the 80% groundswell for it. Similarly, no party has put in their platform such immensely popular measures as severing the megabusines - megalabour control over politicians. Nor was a rush to outbid Preston Manning when he formed the Reform Party and sought to transform the lush pasture for spent minds that the Canadian Senate is, into a democratically elected House.

To mandate meaningfully those who we may elect to parliament, it is essential to separate the mandating from the electing processes. We

need the facility to elect the individuals best suited to make our laws and otherwise manage our public affairs without being detracted by promises of electoral lollipops. To do that we need focus .on the pertinent attributes of candidates. The strength of a candidate's loyalty to a party and his/her readiness to obey the Party Whip, figure not at all among the attributes we must seek in those who we want to represent us in the parliament of the realm. Electing diligent rubber-stamps is not what elections are about.

Of course, the candidates have ample opportunity to contribute to composing the mandate we will give them. More than that, they should lead in formulating the mandate we will give whoever we elect. But, at the end of the day, it is "we the people" who must instruct our representatives, it is not they who should drag us into their agenda. It is our right to tell the crew we put at the helm of the ship of state where to sail her.

Of course, long range mandating is handicapped by the scarcity of good crystal balls. However, at any given time a society faces a known set of problems and opportunities. Moreover, there are discernable probabilities commanding preparedness. The national debt, Medicare, participation in Bush's Star War games, trailing Bush into his next war, marijuana legalization, same sex marriages are currently on the radar screen. Such issues should be identified by a panel of learned individuals, the panel assembled and directed by the Chief Electoral Officer.

The issues the panel would identify prior to an election, should be tabulated and communicated to the people at the onset of the election campaign. This would foster scrutiny of the issues and debate, resulting in the electorate being charged with information, which of course, is a pre-requisite to democracy. Such a formalized, objective, enumeration of current issues and their consideration is a process wholly different from the current one under which politicians promise tax-cuts and two chickens in each voter's pot, forever and ever, amen.

Near the end of the campaign course, the list of issues should be published in the form of a multi choice ballot and distributed to voters. The voters would mark this ballot in the comfort of their home, with the benefit from the debate they watched and possibly contributed to themselves. One such ballot for each voter will be accepted at the polling station and cast with due regard to it remaining "secret".

There would be separate ballot boxes at the polling stations. One for electing peoples' representatives to the parliament and one for instructing the representatives on the public will. The mandate that would emerge from the ballot box should set the general direction the government must take, save for the emergence of extenuating circumstances.

It is essential that we proceed in this way. For unless we do, the politicians will continue to take their marching orders from the political parties and their sponsors as they do now. What happens now is wrong, we must stop it, we must make the politicians serve society. For only then the society is self-governed, that is to say, only then the citizens prevail, the society can optimize its well-being.

If mandating is to be part of the electoral system, it must be done properly.