

Terms to Serve

Parliamentary renewal is of paramount importance but does not always happen to a level sufficient to bestow vitality to parliament. Many factors contribute to making parliament stale, a most prominent one among them being that the electoral system currently in force favours the inept and the sinister and inhibits, or bans, the creative, the independent, the honest, those with sand in their blood, the very people who merit being in parliament. Further, the system facilitates the re-election of those who do not rock the boat but jettisons anyone who does not tow a political party line.

Parliamentary renewal is substantially within the domain of electoral systems. After all, the undesirables and the boring who populate the House on the hill, have to be "elected" before they may take their seat and this implicates the election system. A better electoral system would produce a different parliament, albeit a watertight system may never be devised and this is not to be lamented. However, an electoral system facilitating the election of those who merit the honour of serving, while discouraging the inept and the sinister, is feasible and its absence is accordingly inexcusable.

The above speak to that Parliamentary Renewal should be of concern to the CA. And that is why I will discuss it here.

Sometime ago, a Nova Scotia MP passed away. His son, a Vancouver lawyer, headed to the Maritimes to keep in the family his father's parliamentary seat. He did indeed inherit the seat, for at least some time, how long I do not remember.

Ownership of a parliamentary seat? Ownership of a constituency? Bequeathing a parliamentary seat to one's offspring? Where does the public domain end, and where does private property begin?

An American may serve no more than two terms as President of the USA. However, one may "occupy" a seat on Capitol Hill for a lifetime, and many do that, becoming "fixtures" on that Hill, like Svend Robinson and Joe Clark are on our Parliament Hill.

Is it proper to let politicians "occupy" parliamentary seats for long time, and make electoral ridings "theirs"? Is it democratically correct to be governed by "professional" politicians like Joe Clark and Svend Robinson who hardly tasted life outside politics?

Interestingly, politicians in power tend to be most effective when their careers are about to end. Look at the examples I related in a previous article, that of Eisenhower, in the USA and Chrétien in Canada. Eisenhower warned his fellow Americans of the dangers from the "Military-Industrial Complex" and Chrétien introduced "legacy legislation" curtailing corporate control of Canadian elections. Both did what they did only when they reached the end of their careers and had no further need of the "Military-Industrial Complex" the "Corporate Sponsors", respectively, to "re-elect" them. Lesser politicians may simply refuse to cater to some militant group whose vote may decide their re-election, and this is to the benefit of society.

The above suggests consideration should be given to harvesting the energy of politicians by bringing them to the exit of the political stage. The simple way of doing this is, of course, to limit the terms they may serve. In one, or two, terms most politicians will do all they can possibly do, one term being enough for most of them to exhaust their entire potential. It is a virtual certainty that anyone who does nothing in one or two terms in office will do nothing if allowed more terms. The prospect of limiting the terms politicians may serve is appealing.

But... Is it democratic to prohibit re-election of a citizen simply because he or she has already served a number of terms? Does it make sense to ban re-election to a citizen with proven parliamentary performance record and to leave the constituency with a menu of lesser individuals to choose from? Is there any sense in denying citizens the right to be represented by someone they like and trust on the grounds that he/she has served a couple of terms and is entitled to no more?

Perhaps the two greatest members of the Canadian Parliament, at least in living memory, are Tommy Douglas and Stanley Knowles. This duet accomplished Medicare, Old Age Pensions and more - and they did it all from the Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition benches, to boot. Medicare is now not only cherished by the nation, but it is a national feature, distinguishing Canada from Bushland. Douglas and Knowles served many terms in Parliament. Canada would have been that much poorer were they to be excluded, at any time, from seeking re-election. Characteristically, after he was incapacitated by a stroke, Parliament unanimously invited Stanley Knowles to sit in the Chamber - in the hope, one presumes, that his presence would inspire the "ordinary MPs".

Yet, Parliament needs to be continuously renewed, for otherwise it becomes stale and dysfunctional. How to do it, how to balance the need for renewal with the right of citizens to be elected, the right of the electorate to be represented by whoever they may choose? And how do we ensure that society does not miss out on a Tommy Douglas, on any of these rare minds society so erratically and sparingly produces? The answer is no obviously and I, for one, I am at a loss for it.

But there is hope; there is always a way when there is a will to be fulfilled or a need to be met. If a problem appears insoluble, one may bypass it, or even eliminate it. If you cannot cure SARS or Avian Flu, you quarantine SARS -infected folks and incinerate Avian flu-affected flocks. The approach is no direct, it produces no cure, it does not solve the problem, it sidetracks it and this means that the approach "works". What is good for the birds, is good for MPs and MLAs, it is good for everything really.

Now we may be getting somewhere and two tasks become discernable; the first is finding and plugging the loopholes through which deadwood-types sneak into Parliament. The second is finding the anchors that hold these people in their parliamentary seats and cutting the ropes to let them drift out.

The former of these concerns, plugging the loopholes through which the inept and the sinister enter parliament lies in the lap of the CA. The CA must find the loopholes and plug them, because they go right through the electoral system. It is also the CA who must search for, find and destroy electoral system obstacles to citizens of merit so that they may reach parliament to serve society. The CA must also research the phenomenon of politicians with a proven record of ineptitude, failure or despicable conduct managing repeated re-elections, so as to address it.

To make a long story short the root of the problem is the distortion of the election process affected by the political parties. They control the election system by financing political campaigns and by other means. Their stranglehold on the electoral process has tighten so much that no "independent" candidate may ever again be elected, unless the system is reformed. What they have done is no different from forcing the nation to attend church service every Sunday, albeit "at the church of your choice". They have made the seats of the society's parliament "reserved" for party disciples.

The trouble is that the needs and aspirations of the society are often, if not mostly, at variance with the objectives of political parties, indeed the two sometimes clash. Parties alienate politicians from the people they are supposed to serve, they demand submission to the party's objectives, require blind obedience to the Party Whip and total faith in the Party Leader. These are not the attributes of members of Parliament, these make up a janitor's job description.

But that is what the party wants and gets. Since one may not enter Parliament unless one submits to a party, Parliament becomes populated by Trudeau's "nobodies" and Mulroney's "trained seals". No surprise then...

Providing a member of parliament shows no signs of creativity, originality or independence during his tenure, he/she is assured repeated party nominations for re-election. Since nominations usually go to the incumbent, other aspiring candidates must patiently wait for the party nomination till the incumbent is no more. This adds substantial dimensions to the complicity of parties to parliament being toothless and boring.

There are other advantages combining to make it difficult for a deserving newcomer to dislodge any undeserving incumbent. These include the high profile the incumbents acquire while in Parliament, connections with the mass media they develop, the facility to claim constituent gratitude for the Recreation Center the government built in the riding and so on. It is hard for the opponents of the incumbent to overcome these advantages.

The above suggest a two-pronged approach. The one is to level, as much as possible, this badly tilted election field. This means that incumbents should not be allowed to hide the "minus side" of their record. The entire record of the incumbent must be exposed to the constituents, intact, the bad along with the good. The incumbents' record of attendance in parliament, the way they voted in each Bill that came before the House, the legislation they initiated, if any, and everything else pertaining to their "job description", should all be hung out in view of the public eye at election time.

This would serve well the cause of accountability and otherwise make for a fair election contest. As a bonus, it may make members of parliament work hard to ensure that their report card is the best they can get. Who knows, some incumbents may not even dare run for re-election if their ineptitude and/or their servitude are to be exposed -

their absence from the ballot being no loss to the society. Virtue has value even if involuntary.

The most effective means to protect society from the inept and the sinister is to limit, or eliminate, political party involvement in elections. The more the parties are distanced from the election process, the better the chance the real leaders would have to get elected, the more likely it would be that they will step forward to serve society, the more they will be protected against being corrupted by political parties, the more the likelihood society will be spared the fate of being run by "nobodies" and "trained seals".

Distancing the parties from the election process will result in personal merit displacing subservience to political parties as the essential prerequisite to being elected to parliament. Better people will offer to serve and those who will be given the nod by the electorate will be better than the crop produced by the current system. And they will be free to respond to the needs of the society, as they must, instead of catering to the whims of their party, its hidden sponsors and its other manipulators.

Doing the above may not be a panacea; yet, it would be a great leap forward. And it can be made without depriving citizens from the right to serve, without denying society the services of the Tommy Douglasses of this world, without denying people their fundamental right to be represented in parliament by whoever they chose to be represented by.