

THE EQUAL RESOURCES ELECTORAL SYSTEM

The Citizens' Assembly (CA), being a "first", should not come up with a rehash of the old and tired. The existing electoral systems were devised in years past by politicians for their own benefit - the CA must come up with something fresh, something reflecting our times, something for the people, something to facilitate true democracy.

On September 7, 2004, I made a proposal to the CA. It is simple and I expressed it as briefly as possible for I am mindful of the CA Members time. I call it the "Equal Resources" electoral system because of its main feature - the one that sets it apart from all the other systems which were laid out by the CA Profs at the CA Boot Camp and the CA Website.

I think I should elaborate a bit on my proposal, for the detail in the original paper is scarce. This is what I propose.

1. The tap root of the Equal Exposure system is, of course, fairness. The objective is to give all citizens willing to serve society an equal chance to present themselves to the electorate.

Equality is fundamental to democracy. It is embedded in the Canadian constitution as it is in the constitutions of all non-oppressed nations.

An electoral system which allows violation of the principle of equality is not democratic. Yet, that is what our current electoral system does and that is what all the systems taught at the CA Boot Camp do, without exception. They all facilitate the control of parliament by the parties, who, in turn, act as agents of particular interests. By purchasing the services of professional mind manipulators and deploying their in-house well-oiled propaganda machine, they draw out the bids of non-party candidates. The parties are ruthless, to the extent that "independent" candidates are *a priori damned* to failure leaving the parliament to be dominated by "dependants" to the parties and, by extension, to those who sponsor the parties. The Equal Resources election system will make it feasible for the people to elect their own representatives into the society's parliament.

Significantly the prerequisites to running for election in British Columbia are three: citizenship; nomination by 25 citizens; and payment of a small fee. There is no other pre-requisite. Wealth, party nomination, propensity to servitude, and willingness to trade the peoples' trust for election funds are all alien to democracy. It falls upon the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) to ensure these essential prerequisites are met. Due to the law being made by party-controlled politicians, the CEO is not empowered to ensure that moneyed interests do not interfere with the democratic process.

Beyond these three objective requirements, there are desirable and essential qualities voters wish for their representatives in parliament. These are numerous and not all of them are tangible. It falls upon the electorate to assess these and, on the balance of merit, to select the best among those aspiring to represent the people in parliament. The task is difficult and it requires adequate exposure of the candidates to the electorate. For the contest to be fair, all candidates must have equal opportunity to present themselves to the electorate.

All candidates are bound to put their best foot forward; it is a human trait. There are also "con-persons" about - persons with the capacity to deceive - and such individuals are attracted to politics. This is "normal", in the sense that they always occur, in all fields of human endeavour, including politics. Most of the time, the voters will sort things out and the con-persons will be shown the exit, be it sooner or later. This problem is manageable.

What is catastrophic to the election process is wealth. Wealth can buy the services of professional mind-manipulators and unleash them upon the people. It can buy fora from which to spread propaganda and otherwise manipulate "ordinary" peoples' minds so as to affect an election result different than it would be if the people were left to exercise their own judgement.

Indeed, in some "free" societies, money buys for the ruling minority what raw force gets for a dictator. In one sense the power of money is more ferocious than raw force because the former is surreptitious while the latter is overt.

We have separated the Church from the State for good and valid reasons and for precisely the same reasons we must now separate Commercial Corporations from the State. While we have to live with "con-persons", we do not have to allow the rich to unleash professional mind-polluters to ply their trade upon us. Just as we have outlawed bullies, thieves and muggers, so we must distance from the election process those who assault our minds, who steal democracy from us, thereby causing us the pain from being governed by politicians who are, in general, much lesser than who we deserve.

It is imperative that we act resolutely to prevent wealth for amplifying the voice and magnifying the profile of "sponsored" election candidates and drown out the voice and dwarf the profile of those who would not "sell out" to parties and their sponsors. Plutocracy must not displace democracy.

Regrettably this is what happens now and this the CA has the facility

to bring to an end. The demise of the quasi plutocracy is long overdue and it is incumbent upon the CA to do it, on behalf of the people. The society needs an even and level election field, on which all candidates for election may present themselves to the electorate and claim the peoples' trust to govern the society.

The most immediate benefits of Equal Resources elections are three, each of them having large dimensions of significance. The first is that citizens will select the best of the candidates, for they will make their decision free from the influence of professional mind-manipulators.

The second being that it will cause the emergence of good candidates and will shield them from being bribed with campaign money and becoming corrupt. The society's best, those who now refuse to shed their dignity, those who would not prostitute themselves to political parties and submit to Party Whips, would then have a fair chance and therefore will come forth to serve their society. As a result, the people will have good candidates to chose from.

The third is that when citizens can run without "licence" from parties or anyone else for that matter, new ideas, Socratean "kaina demonia" will be put before the people. Ideas which may interfere with the continuous hegemony of the establishment are often banned, be it overtly or subtly. Socrates, Galileo and an array of other thinkers would testify to that, in a big way. Yet, ideas are what civilization is made of, they matter very much to the society - they must not be suppressed.

When members of parliament are no longer dependent on parties for their re-election, they would speak their minds, vote in accordance with their conscience and take their bearings from their constituents. They would not have to beg for "free votes" in parliament; they will be free to vote for they will be free people, saddled with no debt to anyone, answerable only to their constituents, free of the need to cater to those who now buy elections for politicians in exchange for subservience.

The Equal Resources system will end the dominance of the electoral scene by opportunists who go into politics to attach themselves to the public trough. And will protect decent but naive citizens who enter politics aspiring to change things for the better, only to become, instead, digested in the bowels of the behemoth. The overall result of Equal Resources elections will be a society reaping the benefits of democratic governance.

To implement the Equal Resources system the Chief Electoral Officer shall provide to all candidates equal space in a newsprint pamphlet to be mailed to all the voters of their constituency. The CEO will also provide a

small but adequate block of television, radio and web space to candidates, all free of charge.

Please do not despair, for the cost will be modest and certainly substantially less than the current cost of elections. This because private financing has made elections extravagantly expensive. Not to mention the cost to society of politicians dipping into the treasury to repay those who underwrite their elections and to lure those who may do so in the future. And the millions of dollars politicians pay from the public treasury to the parties, so as to lessen the burden of their sponsors in maintaining the parties. These costs are enormous sums to the society and this, too, will be all but eliminated if we, the people, pay for our democracy and keep the cost at the optimum level. Just remember the "Sponsorship" scandal and do not forget that it is the tip of a well veiled iceberg comprising many who will never come to light. Equal Resources will moderate the cost of elections; the savings over the current practice will be substantial.

Even more significant is that the Equal Resources system will elevate the quality of information provided to the voters with attendant benefits to society. This would not be difficult, for the current out-of-control election spending is grossly counterproductive to democracy.

Incidentally, money spent by private interests, are not a "free lunch" for taxpayers, for such they do not happen; it all comes out of the peoples' pockets, irrespective of who shells the money out, be it government, business or labour.

A hot issue is the role of the parties. I will try to "be realistic and pragmatic", as I usually do. I would suggest that parties be allowed to advertise and even to nominate candidates. However they must limit the advertising to their platform, and refrain from advertising their nominee, if any. For their nominee will have ample opportunity for exposure alongside the other candidates in the running.

Every candidate would have the the right to declare himself/herself, entirely on his/her own, a candidate for any party. It is tantamount to any candidate saying "I like most of what a given party stands for and, if elected, I will support these in the House" – isn't it what parties pretend they want?

This will result in numerous candidates running for each of the parties, competing against each other as well as against the candidates running for the other parties and the independents. They will have to earn the peoples' trust.

There are good and valid reasons for allowing any citizen to declare

himself/herself candidate for any political party. To begin with, if parties are allowed to advertise and if they nominate a candidate and forbid others to run on their "platform", the party candidates would have more exposure to the electorate than independent candidates. Indeed, candidates of well endowed parties would have an advantage over candidates from less affluent parties, as happens now. This advantage can be mitigated if anyone can declare himself/herself candidate for any of the parties and let the people decide who is to be elected.

Self-nomination of candidates is further justified by the recognition that no party has a rightful proprietorship to any band on the ideological spectrum. That is to say, since parties have staked the entire political-ideological spectrum; since parties have seized the names of the cardinal points of the political spectrum, the "Right", the "Left", the "Center" and the "in-between"; since candidates for election should have the right to identify themselves in terms of their position in the spectrum; therefore candidates must have the facility to do so and if it can be done effectively by identifying their position in terms of a political party so be it.

It is improper to let parties sweep off the edge of the political spectrum citizens who refuse subservience to parties. It is time to make citizens welcome to the service of their society by stopping the parties from degrading all but their own mercenaries to a second class candidate.

Candidates who get elected under the banner of a party may band together in parliament. However, the result will be an association of free people, as contrasted to the current pods of "trained seals".

When self-nominated candidates are elected, they will have neither committed themselves to the party, or its leader, nor would they fear expulsion from the party if they do not toe the party line - therefore they will be peoples' representatives instead of party hacks. The parties would have to earn the loyalty of members for they would not be able to buy it.

2. There are limits to the feasibility of Equality. For example, incumbents have a high profile, their pictures have figured often in the papers and on the television screens and their words have been frequently broadcast. It should be so; citizens should be in constant contact with their representatives in parliament. Yet, this results in high "name recognition" which figures largely in their bid for re-election and which works against the renewal of parliament. While incumbents must not be disenfranchised, the need for democratic renewal must be addressed, for it is always urgent.

To mitigate the advantage of the incumbents as well as to serve other democratic causes, I propose to embed into the Equal Resources system

what one may call the publication of the "Incumbents' Parliamentary Service Record". This will ensure that incumbents, "run on their record", meaningfully of course, as they must. To that end, in a structured, easy to review format, the incumbent's parliamentary service record, shall be mailed to constituents at the beginning of the election campaign. It should list Legislation the incumbent initiated, attendance record, the way he or she voted on legislation brought before the House and the junkets she or he went on. It will be constructive and it would be a pleasant change from the current incumbent practice of listing the summer club picnics they attended in the riding, hiding their performance in the House. Indeed, this amounts to an acknowledgment that they are undeserving re-election.

At this point I will anticipate questions about freedom of speech and its expression, that most invaluable of all human rights, the cornerstone of the edifice of democracy. This because monied interests have inserted into our conventional wisdom the notion that freedom of speech is a function of the size of the purse of whoever wants to exercise it. This is wrong.

To illustrate this, I will cite the raging battle of the "Gag Law". This, so dubbed by the NCC, is the law limiting "third-party" spending on elections to \$500 per riding. NCC is the "National Citizens Coalition" which harboured Stephen Harper between stints in politics. Harper led a crusade against the \$500 per riding spending limit, claiming that it violates the right of people to spend as much money as it may take to warp the election results. The crusade survived Harper's second coming to politics, Mr. Mark Milke, a newspaper columnist, being now a prominent combatant for it. I discuss the Gag Law, in articles #21 and #40 in Alcyone News. Here I will merely reproduce a paragraph from one of the articles:

The law in its majestic equality must allow dwellers of corporate towers, equally as does those who sleep under the bridge, to spend unbound sums of money to subvert democracy, by seeking to change the results of elections to other than would be if left to citizens' own judgement, if elections were conducted on an even election field.

It is of course a take off from the famous Anatole France quote. I used it to sum up the outlook of the NCC and of the "rich", in general. I rest my case.

3. An electoral system must have a built-in renewal mechanism. Especially in an era when the world moves at electronic speed, as it now does. It is because of the lack of such a mechanism that we are running on the current antiquated electoral system, one designed for politicians addressing the voters from railway cars, at whistle stops. Like plants and

humans who carry their own seeds, so should elections, being meant to carry the race along the road of civilization.

We cannot impose our will on future generations and to the greatest degree possible we should avoid creating fait accompli situations. The electoral system should be self-upgrading to keep in synch with the needs of future generations and the demands of an evolving civilization, not all of which we may anticipate.

In the instance of the CA there is an additional aspect to embedding a renewal mechanism into the electoral system. It stems from being a "first", a first in people defining the way they select and appoint their representatives in parliament. Being "experimental" the CA is more prone to error than would be if it had a tradition. This, in turn, may necessitate change to its decision.

But there is more to it. It is incumbent upon the CA to defend on behalf of the society the right of the people to determine their electoral system at any time in the future. Society relies on the CA to ensure that never again can the politicians dictate to us, the people, how to elect our representatives in our society's parliament.

The renewal mechanism should include the institution of a permanent Ideas Bank, to be operated by the CEO. This will tap the entire society for new ideas, for ideas are born when they may, to whom they may and the society has a right to all ideas its members may generate.

An elected small "CA" could be in charge, or a prescribed panel of citizens, comprising, for example, leaders of various professions and labour. The administrator would propose amendments to the Elections Act and any the government refuses, should go to a referendum to be piggy-backed on the next election.

4. The other provision of the Equal Resources system is that a member of parliament must represent a majority of the constituents. This may acquire more significance than it has under the current first-past-the-post system, because under the Equal Resources system, there will be more candidates than there are now.

There are basically two ways of ensuring majority consent to represent a constituency: one is a ballot accommodating the expression of second and subsequent preferences, the other being a runoff election with only the two candidates running, those who topped the original poll.

Either will do for starters. I do however prefer the second, for it will,

arguably, yield substantial benefits for the modest additional cost. The benefit will be in giving citizens the opportunity for a second thought. If, for example, the original ballot indicates a "landslide" in a certain direction, the people having become aware of it, may deem it wise to counterweight it. All to the benefit of the society.

The overall result will be a parliament beyond the control of parties, a parliament representing the people, for a change, for the sake of democracy. There is much more to it and I invite criticism and questions, as always.

Tom Varzeliotis.