

Reflections on Canada at 150

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July 1st, 2017, was Canada's sesquicentennial, its one hundred fiftieth birthday. A youngster in comparison to many, not an elder statesman to any. The Canadian maple leaf flag hung on our porch rail, not for pride in our government, but for the realization that by pure chance we live in a remarkable region of the world geographically with a diverse landscape ranging from Atlantic to Pacific and northward to the Arctic oceans. The cultural geography is equally important, representing a large diversity of peoples, from the original indigenous occupants through the colonial-settler immigrants of mostly white European extraction, but including many Chinese, Japanese, east Indians as cheap labour to build the railways and roads. 'Modern' immigrants continue with this but also includes war refugees from South Asia, Latin America, and the greater Middle East.

Diversity is the problem

However diversity has become a problem in precisely the institution where it should be highly valued, Canada's parliament. Yes the ruling Liberals under Justin Trudeau includes a select group of diverse people, but they are essentially token representatives concealing larger problems.

The main problem has been the Liberal's scrapping of their intention to change the electoral procedure from the not very democratic "first past the post system" (FPTP) to something that allows for more diversity for the party structure of government, that allows all voices to be heard, that "your" vote counts.

Having made electoral reform a central campaign promise, Trudeau scrubbed the idea completely after the mandate for his minister was changed in February of this year. His reason is that he had wanted a preferential ballot (ranked ballot) rather than the proportional representation that was the overwhelming favorite of most concerned citizens.

Interesting as to why he did not just say this from the beginning, but it might not have gained as many votes as a full committee on electoral reform (but also considering that many votes were also votes rejecting the Harper government). His reasoning is illogical as he argued later that ranked voting, as compared to both FPTP and proportional representation did not allow for "strategic voting".

Strategic voting is of course the way many people vote in our current system - how to get someone out, someone else in, according to which party has the best chance to do so. The same logic applies to ranked voting, which because of the use of more than one vote actually increases the need to work a good strategy. It is mathematically true that the more options a person has the more one needs to consider strategy - if one understands the statistical possibilities behind a ranked system.

A first vote is obvious for most. A second, third, and however many other votes are allowed would require much awareness of how the different secondary votes would affect the outcome. For that matter, even someone leading after the first round of counting could be defeated by a strong secondary vote for someone who consistently comes up after the various rankings are dropped. Also, someone considered a third choice could win if everyone who voted for a second person chose a wide variety of people none of whom could garner a lead while everyone voted for the same third person. Strategy becomes paramount if the parties wish to instruct their voters how to spread out their votes.

More obviously though, at least in Canada, a ranked ballot would support whichever party can capture the middle or centrist vote. Canadians on the left would not choose someone on the right as an alternative; similarly those on the right would not choose someone on the left. The secondary, tertiary votes would go to the middle, the position the Liberals hope to consider its home ground. Strategy remains strong, if not devious.

Proportional representation, the main choice from the various committees and subcommittees, allows for much stronger representation of all voters as the parliamentary seats are proportionally distributed to all parties. This allows smaller parties to achieve some power and those voters will then have their votes count. The larger parties might have to form coalitions or agreements of some kind with smaller parties in order to remain/achieve power, something Trudeau - and to be fair, the Conservatives - are not particularly willing to do. But it is much more fair to the voter, it does require the parties within the system to - more than likely - work together.

In sum, for Trudeau, Canadian diversity is fine, so long as it does not spill over into governance models that would hinder the power of the major party(ies) in parliament.

Diversity with apartheid?

Another area diversity fails is within Canada's well established apartheid system for its indigenous people. Yes, Trudeau recognizes that much needs to be done, and superficially talks well about the topic, but there is little progress being made to truly solve the issue.

As long as apartheid legislation remains in force - the Indian Act of 1876 - with its "reservations" (How can "reservations", generally small and on poor land that whites did not want, not be considered apartheid?) and separate laws for indigenous people (How can that not be considered apartheid?) little can be accomplished other than a treatment of symptoms but not of the underlying systemic problems.

Fortunately the Canadian Supreme Court appears to be well ahead of the politicians on this and all cases going before the court have found support for indigenous rights and unceded land claims. The former would include the many treaties that have not been honoured, the many broken promises by the colonial-settler policies of earlier governments. The latter, unceded claims, pertains in particular to the province of British Columbia, where the majority of the land has never been subject to treaties and still can be considered to retain indigenous title.

The solution is simple in its most drastic form: get rid of the Indian Act, give the indigenous people large swaths of their territory and resources back, compensation for that which cannot be returned, and allow them to govern themselves independently. Many will argue against compensation, but money in our modern computerized central bank zero interest

monetary regime truly is 'cheap', it can be made to work to the benefit of our GDP – if perhaps not our corporations. Canada needs to negotiate with the independent nations with full respect for the Canadian Charter, the UN Charter of Rights and the UN Declaration of Rights of Indigenous People.

A truly diverse democratic state cannot exist while one group of people, the original inhabitants of the land, are subject to ongoing separate/apartheid laws and conditions.

Bicentennial diversity

Fifty years from now, Canada will celebrate its bicentennial. I will not be around for it, but it will be interesting for those who are there to see if true progress has been made to fully recognize and do something about Canada's diversity rather than talk about it at politically opportune moments.

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