

Canadian democracy and its challenges

Published as a blog on the Broadbent Institute website on November 18, 2015

The Broadbent Institute and the University of Saskatchewan recently co-sponsored a conference on the challenges to Canadian democracy to honour the memory of Allan Blakeney, former Premier of Saskatchewan. Blakeney passed away in 2011.

While there was a wealth of ideas and frank assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of Canadian democracy and concrete solutions on how to improve democratic practices in our country, four themes and four corresponding bottom lines emerged.

Democracy requires politicians to live up to their democratic responsibilities

Much of the discussion at the conference, attended by 300 participants, revolved around how those with political power relate to the citizens that elect them.

- Simone Chambers started the conference with a presentation on “talk centric politics” where elites and citizens need to keep the lines of communication open. A healthy dialogue between voters and politicians is crucial to good public policy.
- Michael Atkinson spoke about how the public is demanding expert decision-making and how politicians must be now prepared to adequately justify all of their actions to voters.

- Dwight Newman argued that the notwithstanding clause in the constitution is a legitimate democratic check on judicial power and forces politicians to take the lead on important issues. He said that the clause could be necessary in cases where judges go too far, like if Supreme Court tried to force the privatization of health care.
- Greg Marchildon argued that the technical advice received by politicians from bureaucrats is “not the whole story.” A creative tension between how politicians interpret the popular will of citizens and the expert advice they receive is the essence of parliamentary government.
- Roy Romanow explained the difficult circumstances that forced the Blakeney government to nationalize a significant portion of Saskatchewan’s potash industry during the 1970s. In trying times, he argued that politicians should rely on “pragmatic idealism” to fulfill their duty to serve the best interests of citizens.

The bottom line: Democracy is not only about how citizens vote; it is about how politicians act once in power. Politicians have the democratic responsibility to act with integrity and to find ways to respond to citizens’ concerns throughout the policy-making process.

Democracy needs equality

Several speakers talked about the relationship between equality and democracy.

- Broadbent Institute Fellow Alex Himelfarb argued that austerity is not about fiscal responsibility. Rather, it is about tax cuts and replacing the pursuit of social justice with managing expectations about what governments can accomplish. He

firmly asserted that we will not turn around the conversation on democracy until we get away from the tax cutting and austerity agenda.

- Nelson Wiseman spoke to the conference on the important role that social democrats and social democratic ideology played in the construction of Canada's welfare state. He further contended that social programs provide a basic material well-being that is important for the functioning of Canadian democracy.
- David McGrane contended that the legacy of Allan Blakeney is greater equality in Saskatchewan and providing improved opportunities for citizens to participate in democracy. When Blakeney was working to create a more equal society, he was also working to create a more democratic society.

Bottom line: In an unequal society, citizens do not have the material well-being or the security to actively participate in democracy. An unequal society encourages citizens to 'check out' of politics and leave politics up to the elites who possess knowledge, money, and privilege.

We cannot have democracy without diversity

Many presenters at the conference noted that discussions of democracy must take place at the same time as discussions about diversity in politics.

- Melanee Thomas argued that a society cannot be democratic if it continually attempts to justify the overrepresentation of men in politics compared to the underrepresentation of women. She contended that the real reason why there are less women than men in politics is that parties simply do not nominate enough women.

- Katherine Walker spoke about the need for democratic societies to respect the rights of their Indigenous citizens. She explained that transforming Canada's federal structures could open up opportunities for reconciliation between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals.
- Reg Whitaker pointed out that democracies need healthy debate on religious accommodation and religious freedom. Democratic dialogue is the best way to adjudicate religious conflict within society.
- John Whyte argued that, while majorities can be slow to redress historical injustice, respect for Canada's diversity demands serious redress. Finding ways to respect and accommodate diversity is the true test of Canadian democracy.
- Hugo Cyr contended that respect for democratic diversity entails finding a common understanding of federalism between Quebec and the rest of Canada. Doing so requires recognition that the primary function of federalism is the allowance of autonomy for individual units within the collective whole.

Bottom line: If Canada's strength is its diversity, our democracy must be structured to reflect that diversity. Opportunities abound to recognize and valorize our diversity, but we must seize them.

Election administration matters

A couple of presenters spoke about how the intricacies of election administration affect the health of our democracy.

- John Courtney noted that, on balance, independent electoral boundaries commissions work well in Canada. However, to

improve their functioning, they have to use social media better and only non-partisan public servants should be appointed to the commission.

- David Coletto said that the permanent campaign means that parties now have an insatiable thirst for money. So, there is a consumerist model that forces parties to pursue lots of small donations and leads them towards concentrating on niche issues. Examining ways to provide fair public subsidies to parties, like having citizens check off which party they would like their tax dollars to support on their tax returns, could elevate this problem.

Bottom line: The devil is in the details and details of the rules governing elections are very important in ensuring fairness in Canada's democracy.

All told, this important conference brought to the fore important currents of thought and discussion on Canadian democracy.

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