

Chapter Three

The Nature of Democracy

The Importance of Information

Trusting in the wisdom of all people to make reasonable decisions for themselves is the foundation upon which democracy stands. To implement true democracy, it is essential that all people have *easy, affordable access and an equal, balanced exposure* to all knowledge, ideas and points-of-view. If some information is concealed, or some opinions censored, then democracy soon chokes on its own ignorance. If a dominant ideology is deliberately maintained by overexposing the people to a certain set of interpretations of reality, then true democratic freedom can never be obtained.

Most people today are kept so busy just trying to earn their daily bread that at the end of the day they have neither the time nor the energy to independently start exploring the true nature of the world's problems. The information they get when they collapse into a comfortable chair to read the newspaper or to watch the nightly news on television is often all that they have to help them understand the complex world around them. The main-

stream media, however, does not report all of the news, or anything even close to it. Instead, it focuses its viewers' attention only on the most bizarre or sensational stories of the day. Treating the news as an entertainment product, the major television networks prefer to present fluid, superficial reports rather than slower-moving but in-depth analysis. When they do solicit the opinions of a "panel of experts", the viewpoints expressed are rarely radical and the questions chosen for discussion often avoid the most important underlying issues. With such a limited frame of reference, it is no wonder that the majority of citizens cannot understand the real problems that society is facing.

It is essential then, in order to fulfill the promise of democracy, that the mainstream media *be required* to provide the public with a full and adequate supply of information which reflects all knowledge, ideas and points-of-view in equal proportion, and which has not been censored or made misleading by any ideological or commercial bias. For too long, we citizens of Canada have accepted the growing corporate concentration in the ownership of the media and the gradual erosion of our right to be adequately and equally informed about all sides of the issues which affect our country and the quality of our lives. If we are ever to enjoy the

freedom of democracy, we must demand the right-to-know, so that we can make informed and reasonable decisions for ourselves. Perhaps the major news media, or any information company that reaches over 50% of the population with its messages, should be required to obtain municipal distribution licenses each year so that if, in the opinion of a community-elected media review board, their coverage of the issues is judged to be incomplete or ideologically biased, their local license renewal could be denied.

Proportional Representation

The principle of one-person, one-vote is the cornerstone of democracy, but in Canada's first-past-the-post electoral system, while all votes are counted, only some votes count. Only the citizens who voted for a winning candidate are represented in parliament. In parliament, the importance of the votes of all those Canadians who supported a candidate who failed to win a seat is zero. Under the present system, when a candidate loses an election, the voters who voted for that candidate lose too. In a true democracy there would be no winners and losers. A true democracy would accurately reflect the collective will of all citizens equally. Is it any wonder that so many people are reluctant to vote

when the right to vote so often turns out to be little more than the right to be ignored?

Most democratic countries in the world use a system of proportional representation to elect their governments. There are many variations of the idea, but usually each voter casts two votes, one for the local candidate of their choice and one for the national party of their choice. The available seats in parliament are filled partially from the votes cast for the parties and partially from the votes cast for the candidates. With proportional representation, even if the candidate you voted for is not elected, your party vote still counts and can help a representative of your party win a seat.

The system also provides voters with a way to split their votes across party lines so that they can support both their favorite party and their favorite local candidate, even when that candidate is from a different party. This can be particularly helpful to voters whose favorite party is too small to run a candidate in their own riding. Proportional representation also reduces the likelihood that a single party will form a majority government with only a minority of the popular vote. Usually some sort of coalition government must share the reins of power which makes secrecy more difficult and encourages vigorous parliamentary debate.

Political Financing

However, even if voters were properly informed and proportional representation was in place, true political democracy would still not be possible until the influence of big money was removed from the political process. In politics, the financiers call the shots. Although the party membership may be free to nominate any candidate that they choose, the preferences of the party's major supporters influence which candidates the party executive will endorse.

It is virtually impossible to win a federal election without spending millions of dollars on advertising and communications strategies and other campaign expenses. The party executive knows that if a leadership candidate is judged to be too radical or outspoken, then the party will fail to attract enough financial support to run a successful campaign. Many exceptionally determined individuals, unable to attract the support of any existing political parties, have run as independents or have formed new political parties, only to find the same financial roadblocks in their way. This powerful screening and control process severely limits the depth of our political democracy.

In 1993, the year of the last federal election, the top 13 corporate contributors to the Liberal

Party were all from the financial services sector. The total value of their contributions was more than \$1.2 million, which is equivalent to the average contributions of over 8,100 individuals. The top 25 corporate contributors donated almost \$2 million to the Liberals, which is equivalent to the average contributions of over 12,700 individuals. Although, in number, the top 25 corporate contributors represented only *five-one-hundredths of one percent* of all those who contributed to the party, the combined value of their contributions represented 13.1% of the total contributions made.

Yet the influence of finance is not confined to the election process alone. Big money also remains actively connected to the government after it assumes power. Not surprisingly, many of the companies which make major contributions to the party are “occasionally” awarded lucrative government contracts for policy research and development initiatives, legal and accounting services, communications and polling work, and various asset procurement, development or disposal projects. The government regularly consults with representatives of the “financial markets” (the international money traders and financial investment brokers) and often relies on the economic research and opinions of many corporate-sponsored “think-tanks” such

as the Fraser Institute, the C. D. Howe Institute and the Business Council on National Interests. As well, many industry associations like the Canadian Manufacturers Association, The Canadian Bankers Association, The Canadian Chamber of Commerce, The Canadian Exporters Association, The Canadian Medical Association, The Canadian Petroleum Association, etc. have sufficient financial resources at their disposal to hire professional lobbyists, as necessary, to keep Ottawa well-informed of their opinions.

Another frightening sign that the federal government is marching in step with corporate interests is the pace at which the privatization of our country's public assets and institutions is occurring. Traditionally, the government sector provided a buffer for average Canadians from the cruel and chilling winds of "pure" market forces. Using our national deficit and debt as an excuse, both the Liberals and Conservatives have been selling off anything that is profitable enough to attract the interests of the private sector. The question that is never asked, let alone answered, in the mainstream media is why, if these operations are, or else can be, so profitable, are we selling them off when the profits that they generate could be used to reduce our deficit? Once we have sold all of our best assets,

what will our country be left with? What will it use as collateral when we need to borrow money again?

The privatization of our public assets makes no more sense than if an individual who was behind on his mortgage payment decided to sell his house in order to raise the money for his payment. Imagine what his banker would say. Think about how difficult borrowing any money after that would become. In a similar way, our government is acting as though it is deliberately trying to bring about a national financial crisis. But why? To disable democracy even further?

Economic Democracy

Our present political system, like clever theater, is staged to pre-occupy and divert the attention of Canadians away from the most important characters, issues and actions in the plot of public life. Every four years or so we get to vote for one of the professional actors that are presented to us by the political parties and their sponsors. Most voters no longer believe that any of the candidates can be trusted to act in the public's best interest after they are elected, yet we continue on with the charade and hope for the best.

The real power of the government does not reside in parliament. It lies in the hands of a few

extremely influential people who hold carefully guarded positions in the Cabinet, the Prime Minister's Office, the Privy Council, the Treasury Board, the Finance Department, and the Bank of Canada. Most Members of Parliament don't understand the really important monetary and economic issues any more than the general public does. They too rely primarily on their party and the media for their information. They are kept so busy with their own portfolios that they haven't got time to investigate the bigger picture on their own. Even if they did, most MPs are powerless to influence the government's agenda. In parliament, they must vote with their party, no matter what, or else face the strict disciplinary measures of the "party whip".

Although political democracy is extremely important, it is only one of the essential ingredients of real democracy. Economic democracy is just as important, if not more so. Economic democracy is only possible when all citizens receive, as a right of their citizenship, enough income to live with dignity and respect. Political democracy gives citizens the right to vote with their ballot. Economic democracy gives citizens the right to vote with their labour and their purchasing power. Only when a person no longer has to worry about earning enough money to enjoy the basic necessities of life

can he begin to think on a deeper level about ethical and spiritual matters. Only when his future income is guaranteed can he begin to ask himself what the true purpose of his life might be.

Economic democracy gives all people the freedom to choose how and where and with whom they will work, and who and what they will support with their dollars when they shop. All citizens are able to self-direct their lives according to their own principles without fearing any loss of income. For example, if a woman believed that computers were dehumanizing society, she could choose to never contribute her labour anywhere that computers are made or sold. If she also believed that industrial fertilizers were harmful to the environment, then she could choose to grow and buy only organically grown fruits and vegetables.

In an economic democracy, each citizen has the necessary economic power to shape society directly through his or her own voluntary actions. In an economic democracy, everyone is equally responsible for the consequences and effects that our collective actions cause. Economic democracy gives everyone alive the freedom and dignity to choose for themselves how they will contribute their knowledge, creativity, talent and passion to society.

Conclusion to Part One

Today there is little left of the free-market economic system that democracy was based upon. The ownership of capital, property and resources is so highly concentrated that very few outside entrepreneurs ever move up into the ruling elite. Without economic democracy, political or social democracy is impossible. Without adequate resources, a citizen must remain dependent on others for his survival. If he is lucky enough to find employment, then he becomes dependent on his employer for his survival. If unemployed, he is forced to become dependent upon the state. Since the industrial revolution, machines and technology have been reducing the number of people that are required to produce the goods and services that “the markets” value. Rather than saving us, productivity increases are destroying us. Producing more, while spending less on labour, only increases the concentration of wealth and necessitates further consumer borrowing.

By restricting the public’s access to money and maintaining a contrived scarcity of income opportunities, a few powerful men prey on the desperation and insecurity that a shortage of capital creates in society. High interest payments and low wages keep workers’ minds focused on the day-to-

day struggle to provide food and shelter for their families. Exhausted by the effort required to obtain the physical necessities of life, the spiritual and creative dimension of life is lost. Rather than encouraging human growth and development in order to celebrate and explore, in awe and with humility, the infinite possibilities of creation, the present economic system's effect is to subjugate and control the human spirit, to confine its independence and to tame its natural inquisitiveness. Only after his spirit is broken will a man allow himself to be exploited and used like a human machine.

It appears that true democracy has been sentenced to death by *capital punishment*. In all of the industrialized nations, the number of jobless and part-time workers is growing. At the same time, governments have been racing to dismantle the social support systems that were put in place to sustain all those who the "free-market" system cast aside. Probably the greatest fear of many people still working is that one day they too might lose their jobs and become dependent upon the state for their survival. When the means of your economic survival is in the hands of others, you become reluctant to speak out against them. Once the will to resist is smothered, the heartbeat of democracy dies.

If technological "progress" has permanently

reduced the need for human labour to such a degree that labour now no longer represents an economically or socially sustainable method by which to distribute income, then perhaps it is time that society devised a new means by which to distribute income in a more just and sustainable fashion. One such solution is the focus of Part Two.

¹ J. S. Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, Book V, Chapter 2, The first edition appeared in 1848.

² J. H. Perry, *Taxes, Tariffs, & Subsidies*, Volume 1, Chapter 5, University of Toronto Press