

The Quebec Conundrum

An argument that a radical idea of “democracy” is being used to break up Canada, one of the world’s longest-lasting and proudest democracies. It is an argument that can’t fly, but the people don’t know why.

The experts have been quarrelling openly over the situation in Quebec for a long time now, a signal to the public that no one knows what is going on. For ordinary Canadians, it seems the high principle of "democracy," which they defend passionately, is being used to dismember their beloved country - which they also defend passionately. So they are understandably confused. They don’t know how to defend democracy and federalism at the same time.

Now for driving back intrusive governments, direct democracy is a good thing. But using it to break up a constitutional federation is another matter. And so it is curious that the democracy thing has become such a panacea notion in modern Canada - and the USA - because the founders of both nations designed governments specifically to check its influence.

Most of them, as Harvard historian Bernard Bailyn puts it, considered democracy "a word that denoted the lowest order of society...generally associated with the threat of civil disorder and the early assumption of power by a dictator."

Goethe warned Europeans that "there is nothing more odious than the majority; for it consists of a few powerful leaders, a certain number of accommodating scoundrels and subservient weaklings, and a mass of men who trudge after them without in the least knowing their own minds." And James Madison, an architect of the American Constitution, put it most poignantly when he warned that direct democracies "have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths."

When we keep in mind that surveys of the voting public reveal a Grade Seven intellectual level, the fear of democracy is more readily understood, for only a minority of any society are ever successful enough to accumulate significant property, to generate wealth, or to lead wisely.

Thus, instead of seeking its own wealth through the more difficult productive means, a system of "majority rule" (50 percent plus one) soon becomes a licence for the majority to plunder the successful minority through exercise of the political means: they vote massively for taxation and redistribution. Arguably, this has happened in Canada with a vengeance over the past thirty years, and our blind binge of public spending proves it. The great bulk of Canada's so-called "social spending" is transferred to middle-income Canadians.

The main side-effects of this vast internal redistributive empire has been the frantic

creation of policies designed to homogenize Canada, even against its natural heterogeneity. Ye shall be one!

Yet it is difficult to refer to all this as the progress, or development of democracy. Those terms imply a movement towards a better stage, and a faith that if we just invoke "democracy" often enough, then by mere incantation, justice and peace will follow in its wake. That is the way the word is being used by the Parti Quebecois.

But this is a shaky faith indeed. It is surely more accurate to refer to the unwinding of democracy, a term implying that the whole process may have a life of its own, and is taking us to places we don't necessarily wish to go.

For example, it has been the imposition of our homogenizing democratic empire, ostensibly designed to pacify and incorporate all the people of Canada, against which the Parti Quebecois faithful are vociferously straining. Which is to say that we may hear too late the warnings of our forefathers as to how the simplistic concept of "50 percent plus one" can ruin a nation. How, on this basis, as a recent *Globe and Mail* editorial put it, "it will take fewer than two million votes to effectively sunder the Dominion of Canada" - about 10% of the voting population.

It was precisely to avoid this sort of possibility that Canada's original Constitution, the BNA Act, never made provision for any legal dismemberment, and the Charter of 1982 basically says that Canada has been put together, and cannot be put asunder except by the highest institutions and authorities in the land, representing all the people.

But never by the rabble. And certainly never by any tin-pot political general leading a small, misinformed, radicalized minority into some confused future utopia after enjoying a century of national largesse.

Pundits everywhere warn that to insist on such "legalism" is frivolous. That some mysterious, unofficial democratic right of the Parti Quebecois to sunder Canada must be respected.

But it bears repeating that such unfettered democracy, applied only to a part of the democratic whole, is the ultimate legalism, for it argues that if two sides in the part are equally balanced, and therefore equally legitimate, one anonymous citizen with a Grade Seven education, from a fractious minority, in a single province, carries in his or her person the legal right to walk into a ballot box and change the destiny of the whole forever.

We have been warned by our founders that great nations are made of sterner stuff.