

POLITICS

*"The purification of politics is an iridescent dream. Government is force."
John James Ingalls*

"Let there be one man who has a city obedient to his will, and he might bring into existence the ideal polity about which the world is so incredulous." Plato

"More men have been elected between sundown and sunup than ever were elected between sunup and sundown." Will Rogers

"Politics is an activity in which the possible is made impossible." Jack Basuk

"Science and Government: A Marriage of Inconvenience." It is the title of an unpublished book by Jack Basuk. It can be found in Canada's Archives.

The time is the future and the place, a nation state, one of several, where politics are all strikingly similar. In other words, their constitutions and electoral processes are alike. Their prevalent political ideologies resemble each other, with some variations because of differences in language, history and culture. This parable deals largely with one such nation. It is reasonable to assume that what occurs there is echoed in all if not many of the others.

I am a historian who has been fascinated by political changes over time. Our current electoral process is only about eighty years old. It came about because radical changes were perceived to be drastically needed. Let me elaborate.

My nation had had a multiplicity of political parties that could all be categorized into three types. Those that were left of center, - the liberals emphasizing the needs of the collectivity; those that were right of center, - the conservatives espousing so-called traditional values; and those at the center taking a rather moderate approach nearly always eschewing a real position on anything. Three parties dominated the political scene, each taking an ideological position along one of these lines. If the truth be told there were only two differences between them. First, one of the three held a majority of the votes and therefore was in power while the two others aspired to replace that party. Second was the moralistic tone or lack of it in the rhetoric they bombastically asserted. A careful analysis of their verbiage clearly indicated that the difference between them was not of substance but of style. After all, a conservative from the past would be aghast at the social positions of those now calling themselves conservatives.

In any case no political party was able to last more than two elections. Each had their turns in managing or more accurately mismanaging our nation. Under this series of governments and for a rather long period of time things went along reasonably well. The electorate had become somewhat jaded if not downright cynical but went along with the status quo, perhaps because most people had no reason to complain. The standard of living was quite acceptable and the degree of freedom or the illusion of it the citizens enjoyed was adequate. Thus each of the political parties really had no reason to change anything.

However there came a time when something occurred that turned out to be the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. Political patronage and corruption in both the public and private sectors had become so prevalent that there was a very real danger of an economic decline so precipitous that it could lead to the tearing apart of the social fabric. Very undesirable upheavals were rapidly becoming a distinct possibility. Mobs were rioting in the streets. The common people might even become a distinct political force and take power. It is well known that those holding power are very reluctant to give it up and so it was. However, as it turned out they had no choice.

The public clamor forced a referendum. The results were certainly disheartening for those in government. While nearly everyone had no problem with the ideologies of the main political parties there was practically unanimous agreement that all who were in the political and bureaucratic parts of governments should immediately be fired and replaced. By whom, became the subject of many discussions. Random selections made by computers were tried. The results were disastrous. Those who had been in positions of authority and power prior to being dismissed had stolen far more than they needed: they were no longer as motivated by greed as they had been. In any case there was not much left to steal. Unfortunately the newcomers were hungry. They wanted what they perceived to be their share. Thus they attempted to abscond with what remained. They were quickly gotten rid of. It appeared that no one could be trusted. Obviously persons of honesty and integrity existed still. The problem was how to identify them or how to set up a system that would make it impossible for the chicanery of the past to reoccur.

Then someone quite unknown came up with a novel solution that appeared in a journal with a miniscule readership. By accident, one of the leading academics of the day read the article, was fascinated by it and republished, taking most of the credit for this very innovative idea. Sadly, to this day, the person who so radically changed the course of history remains unidentified. What a pity! In any case, he or she reasoned that the only entity that could be trusted was a carefully programmed computer. In other words, what was being proposed was government by computer. The idea caught on.

A team of the most celebrated computer experts, philosophers, political scientists and engineers was brought together to work out the pertinent logistics. It took quite awhile because of the many egos involved. However, a consensus was reached eventually and the experiment commenced. It turned out to be quite successful.

Principally, the plan consisted of the following essentials:

- Each political party would be assigned a computer network of nearly infinite potential.
- Each computer network would be given an amount of computing power in direct proportion to the votes its party had received in a general election.
- A political party had to receive a minimum of ten percent of the votes before its computer network would acquire any computing power.
- The government would then consist of all computer networks that had been elected.
- No individual or interest group was to have any access to any of the elected computer networks. Any attempt by anyone or any group to invade or hack into one of the computer networks would result in the harshest of punitive measures.
- The only directive that the computer network in power or any of the others elected had to obey was that policies and actions undertaken had to be in the best interests of the majority of the nation's citizens and not do undue harm to anyone else.

The result of the first election was that the government now consisted solely of three computer networks roughly corresponding to the past three main political parties. Overnight the size and cost of government was drastically reduced mainly because the very first thing the new government enacted was the total abolition of all government departments. Thus the salaries of all public servants and members of parliament no longer had to be paid. Government work was to be contracted out to the private sector as the need arose. Contracts were to be awarded after scrupulous bidding had taken place. While the contracts were lucrative, the associated profits were not excessive. Cost overruns were simply not permitted. Any deviation from the written contract by a firm awarded a contract would result in its bankruptcy. Further, a continuous detailed accounting of all expenditures was to be submitted on a daily basis. The governing computer network's computing power easily permitted this.

We now had a government that was efficient and scrupulously honest. Things improved at a rapid rate. Neighboring nations looked upon us with a great deal of envy. As someone named Charles Caleb Colton once observed, "Imitation is the sincerest flattery." Governments by computer networks were quickly established in all our neighboring states. There was and is no way of ascertaining whether their software was or is exactly similar to ours, especially the prime directive. In any case for quite awhile things seemed to be going well. Our external relations were cooperative and friendly. It was just too good to last.

I can only speculate as to source of the troubles that beset us. An old adage asserts that, 'Possessions take on the characteristics of their owners.' It is possible that the computer network of our closest neighbor only did what it was programmed to do. Its principal directive probably stated that, 'Any policy and action undertaken has to be in the best interest of its citizens.' It may have acted accordingly, giving rise to all sorts of problems that remain unresolved.

Unfortunately, not all nations worldwide had achieved the same level of economic and political development that we had. There were frequent but not overly dangerous conflicts between them as they vied for greater economic and military security. Our neighboring computer network appreciated that here was a market for military equipment that could be of tremendous economic benefit to its citizens. It also understood that such an industry could be viewed as a threat by its neighbors therefore it decided to also build up its military, ostensibly to defend itself but also to test its cache of arms. Our own computer network very quickly recognized what was transpiring and decided that it too had to build up its military and create an arms industry. It did not take long for an arms race to come about. Sadly, computers are binary entities with no appreciation for the subtleties that are required to ease tensions and resolve conflict situations. Currently our two nations are at a loss as to how to cope. They glare balefully at each other making all sorts of threatening sounds. History seems to be repeating itself. "The more things change, the more they remain the same." The danger is very real.

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