

A Philosopher's Electoral Reform Brief
On Democratic Limitations, Accuracy and Communication
By: Spencer Ferri

Summary

The author has two intentions in writing this brief. First is to be a dutiful citizen. Second is to play his part in the democratic process. The paper is inspired by the author's values and his knowledge. He appreciates this council's respectable work on the matter of electoral reform, hereafter "the matter" or "the matter at hand". Regarding the matter, the author wishes to make clear he concurs with the position many in this room have taken in support of Proportional Representation. It is a good first step. He argues short-term thinking will not magically resolve all problems.

Following an argument for long-term thinking, the author explores the limitations of modern democracy. He then introduces two electoral methods: Tiered Democratic Governance, or TDG, and Liquid Democracy. He explores the methodologies of these two systems and explains how they could be installed into the Westminster system. He refers to this Westminster 2.0 method as a Westminster TDG.

Author's Notes

I know this council's time is precious and the number of people seeking to be a part of it is no-doubt quite large. Still, I never feel comfortable writing a document entirely void of personal expression. But watching your dialogue on the matter is inspiring. I am pleased to hear all parties involved participating with alacrity. I do hope to contribute something meaningful to the dialogue.

Purpose

The primary purpose of my brief is to explore democratic problems and electoral methods which this council may have over-looked on the matter. Its second purpose is to honour the citizen's duty when the government calls for participation. Its tertiary purpose is selfish. I value political participation and political expression and wish to act according to my values. I am a philosopher, and though I know philosophical thinking has become less popular a mental sport I think it may still guide one to worthwhile ideas.

Limitations of Democracy

Canadian democracy, as said in reference by members of this council, is a 19th century machine struggling to adapt to 21st century demands. It yields to cronyism. It discourages voters. It has a difficult time encouraging political education. It has difficult time disseminating information to the public. It does not maintain public trust well. You have been discussing the matter in the hopes of remedying some of these problems. It was asked if PR would even amplify voter turn-out. The counter argument was one of ethics. Whether the people want participatory democracy or not isn't important. Democratic values demand proportional representation.

These are not the only limits to the Westminster system. Others are worth discussing. The mechanism of political parties themselves are a blend of witty dialogue and petty rivalry, of political expression and aristocratic prevalence, of rational argument and rhetorical pleading, of aiming for strong government – and, unfortunately, buying expensive marketing campaigns. We spent \$375 million dollars electioneering last election. Due to the dispersion of citizens per MP it is impossible to make way without paying for media advertising. And since your opponent will do the same this game of conflict amplifies the need of each player to rely on electioneering.

This council represents everything good about democracy: a group of concerned representatives calling on people to guide their months-long dialogue. The goal? To solve a problem. The Trudeau government seems concerned to do democracy right. But just as often in western democracy problems presented are over-simplified.

Their solutions are also often given simply. Or otherwise omnibus bills exploit the attention span of the demos. There is a strategy-gaming inherently possible in 17th-19th century democracies. This administration and council are great advertisements for the success of Canadian democracy. But this does not mean Canada will always have something like the current administration or council. Historically speaking this administration's earnestness is anomalous. If this be a minor golden age then as with all golden ages it will end.

A rise in focus on tactics will always emerge when strong, competitive leadership dominates a party. And all the while as the population grows so too does the diffusion between citizens and politicians. We citizens are hardly all able to accurately judge the character of our local candidates for parliament, let alone our federal or provincial leaders. This council has also noted the complexity which occurs with referendum; most people are incompetent to be informed enough to vote on many issues. Polarizing issues can also rip a citizenry in half. Citizens elect representatives so they don't have to have a detailed opinion of every issue, and they hardly have the time to even be aware of why you pursue the matter. This may be all the more reason why we need councils like this one to study the subject: it is you first and foremost who must have an informed opinion, not for self-interest but the democratic general good.

It is still the case many citizens engage themselves in meaningful protest. It is not often the case a council like this gathers to change policy – far more often when this kind of change happens it is by persistent and passionate protest. In the past it has been difficult to prompt government to take the time to do these studies after they had won majorities, as easy as it was to say otherwise beforehand. There is no reason to think that, in the future, successful governments will want to revisit the issue either. But the problems which have been noted, and the problems which follow this paragraph remain. A creeping, power-based method and for that cost makes no sense in a digital world where information exchange can be cheap, instant and simple.

If we are not beholden to a technological machine, for all its virtues and glitches, then we are stuck with an economic machine which is no less susceptible to problems of functioning. The machine itself is beholden to those who keep it alive – donors and lobbyists quite often. There does seem to be a number of politicians who are elected who desire to truly represent their constituents. But ultimately a party, no matter how virtuous its membership or mission statement, must discard morally great ideas due to the expediency of political needs. The circles of political power which result as a combination of the need for money and the need for uniformity casts the citizen out of their very democracy! The glitch of the economic system is in the delivery of grease to the wheel. This leads to internal corruption and factional in-fighting. This provides a basis for adversarial politics within parties which is beyond the power of PR to fix. Proportionate representation is a step away from adversarial politics but it is by no means will it be the last. The matter is not resolved.

A Summary of the Limitations

I think twelve simple limitations may be extracted from this:

- 1) Political parties becomes an exclusive club the closer to the top you go.
- 2) Political parties cannot be true and perfect think tanks.
- 3) The political process is not a screening process which assures us the most qualified person is in the position to make a specific decision.
- 4) Political parties must be marketing machines.
- 5) Often, though not exclusively, problems are over-simplified and so-too are their solutions.
- 6) Elected officials spend too much time on politics rather than governance.
- 7) Voters are too disconnected to be skilled judges.
- 8) Political parties are often necessarily short-term thinkers.

- 9) The party wheel is beholden to they who grease it.
- 10) Political parties are incapable of dealing with internal correction competently.
- 11) Party politics must naturally be adversarial.
- 12) This all hinders a party's ability to positively shape society.

I want to stress that past methods of government are hardly better, and in fact worse in relation to these limitations. In this regard I think Winston Churchill said it best: democracy is the worst form of government besides all others which have been tried.

Tiered Democratic Governance

Tiered Democratic Governance is the invention of an Albertan author named Dave Volek. Though I've never met him personally, I have studied the democratic method he published for free on the internet. I believe it was the author's genuine aim to resolve the problems of western democracy by finding a middle-ground between the need for participatory democracy and the reality of the need for political representation. Throughout his book he looks at what a creative, new electioneering process would be from top to bottom and re-enforces the system with councils of advisors selected from experts in a given field. This is a complete and nuanced system detailed over 129 pages.

After rationally examining in the first chapter the fictional relationship between two nations, one of which is operating under a TDG in chapter one, he gives a greater description of the twelve limitations of modern democracy in the next chapter. Chapter three details the basic mechanism of tiered governance and chapter four discusses the consultation-based decision making process he contrasts to classic power models and modern democratic models of decision making. In chapter five he talks about the advisory boards of experts and specialists who help representatives come to informed decisions. The rest of the book discusses ways to peacefully transition a society into a TDG, with one chapter discussing the evolution of a democratic society, and the next discussing the transition of authoritarian states.

In this explanation I will stick to the information yielded in chapters three and four.

Tiered Democratic Governance is a method which begins in the neighbourhood. The Neighbourhood tier is a small tier encompassing 150 people. These people vote among themselves to elect a Neighbourhood Representative – henceforth NR. The NR is a voluntary position with relatively few responsibilities. The primary responsibility of NR's is to gather within their district to elect a District Representative. Each tier would elect the representative up to the next tier until the nation is represented through to the top.

In a way, I don't see why we would need to change the electoral system past the council of NR's. District Representatives seem no different than MP's when it comes to the scale of their representation. Rather than elevate the TDG into a single ruler or a council of representatives, the MP's would elect a Prime Minister much as it is now. But rather than spend \$375 million dollars to get that set of MPs, we let small groups of peers decide who among them are best suited to participate in a council which elects an MP, and the MP is one of these trusted NR's.

In historic politics it is often by power that decisions are made, and the country is subject to the random chance the authority was wise or foolish. And in democratic parties, circles of power can block the circulation of new ideas with tactics despite their potential merit. Volek believes that the decision making process should be as this special council appears. In fact I am shocked at the degree to his consultative method has a home in the current democratic method. This council has brought together many people with many different viewpoints and it has exposed them to new ideas on democratic theory. This meeting is open even to citizen consultation. I should think Volek believes all councils should make their decision in this manner, with rigorous expert and citizen consultation.

Liquid Democracy

I feel that Tiered Democratic Governance is a great method to allow the citizenry truly accurate representation. I also believe TDG would allow for a government which is composed of a trustworthy set of MPs. But it does nothing to remedy the problem our government has with inspiring political participation. There are also components in TDG I simply don't agree with. For instance, Dave Volek suggests TDG elections should be yearly. The ever-present flame of being fired should help to keep the politician upright and duteous. Yet, as has been pointed out by this council, the Canadian people do not want frequent elections. In addition, changing the way the system works doesn't change the way people work. Canadian citizens are not motivated to observe or interact with their politics. Simply training themselves to be informed about what the government is doing is difficult enough, let alone training themselves out of their own scepticism that government is effective or honest. Some are too distracted by entertainment to care and others more actively see their non-participation as a kind of protest.

Liquid Democracy is a great opportunity to give Canadians a new window into governance. As opposed to TDG, Liquid Democracy is a technological solution to modern democratic problems. It's not just a voting mechanism; it is a whole democratic method and operating system. It begins with the idea that any person ought to have the option to either participate directly in their government's affairs or elect a delegate to vote on their behalf. I go a step further and merge this mechanism with TDG; within a neighbourhood a citizen can delegate their right to vote for a NR to a trusted neighbour or vote directly on the issue. If an entire neighbourhood has neither a nominated or willing candidate it can delegate its responsibility to elect an MP to another NR.

This system of election takes place in a particular kind of digital environment. What really excites me about the system is not the delegatory voting system but its technological underpinning. It is an Ethereum-based system which is a powerful technology similar to, but more dynamic than bit-chain technology. It has a rigorous functioning which allows it to have a similar set of rules and responses as a corporation might have. And because it's a decentralized, self-validating system it becomes incredibly difficult to hack. I believe the Liquid Democracy application being designed through Ethereum could be adapted to suite any political method, but rooted in a Westminster TDG it may cause the democracy to become extremely agile public communication and information exchanging system. The use of law could force that all smartphones in Canada be designed with an app that accesses the voting mechanism. The app itself would supply voting opportunities, public updates, brief submittal forms, real-time opinion polling and many more services directly to the public. Access to the app could be permitted not by an online sign-up system, but by visiting public offices and manually setting up accounts by verifying voter identity.

Ease of access to government will directly counter public laziness. NRs directly confront people's scepticism that the government is an exclusive club, and will amplify its knowledge of public methodology. Smartphone notifications will keep citizens up-to-date with public updates in real-time despite being distracted by apps and streaming services. Having a simple, real-time communication strategy will allow citizens to easily test their theory that they have no voice in Parliament. Allowing people to choose they whom they know they trust into Parliament reduces the belief that government is corrupt. Empowering councils like this one to seek citizen and expert opinion will allow the Westminster TDG a chance to be a truly intelligent democracy. This system works both for the benefit of citizens and government. Finally it is my belief that operating off the world's most unique democratic method – one partially invented by a Canadian - would give us an edge on the global stage.

Thank you very much for listening to my proposal. I hope you find rational consensus.

Spencer Ferri

