

Democracy is Hard: Part 2

Representative Government

The United States of America



We in America do not have government by the majority. We have government by the majority who participate.
– **Thomas Jefferson.**

I start with a quote from Jefferson because it has just as much validity today as it did back when he said it. And what he meant by participate is voting. The idea of voting for a person to represent you in the government is the basis of representative government. If you don't vote, you are not represented.

Democracy gets pretty unwieldy when your voting population gets large. Hence, the representative model. Originally, it was thought that such a model would make everyone free. But as history shows, there is always someone or group finding a way to manipulate government in their favour.

There are a number of representative models in the world, but I will focus on the two I know best, Canada and the United States. The systems each need a little too many words to explain, so we'll start with the US system. Both have their founding in the British parliamentary system, so let's start there.

By the late 1700's, the British parliament was pretty much in control of government in Britain. The king was the head of state and still wielded power, but not much could be done without the support of parliament. There were two parts to parliament by this time. The House of Commons consisted of elected representatives based on populations while the unelected House of Lords consisted of the landed nobility based on regions. With taxation securely in the hands of the Commons, they tended to hold the most sway. However, since all of the voting members in the Commons and the general public were lower gentry and business men, there were not too many times when the three levels of government couldn't reach an agreement. The monarch slowly rose above the fray and began to

have less and less power to do anything themselves. Memories of Charles I having his head removed by Parliament in 1649 no doubt kept them from becoming too ornery after that.

The Canadian system follows the British model fairly closely. The American system is different. The reasons for the difference is simple. The United States fought a bloody seven year conflict with Britain, at the time the most powerful country on the planet. When it was time to create a governing system, there were thirteen individual states originally all wanting to go their own way and a continental congress wanting to fix the inadequacies of the British system that had been a tyranny in its colonies. Congress was also broke and had not paid their army. Only the fact that George Washington had no desire to be King of America did the American Revolution (or War of Independence, depending on your point of view) not devolve into a dictatorship.

So the founding fathers dove into constructing a new form of government, but the best existing model at the time was the British one. So, they created two houses: the House of Representatives (like the Commons and based on population and elected); and the Senate (like the House of Lords, each state gets two senators). Until 1913, the senators were elected by their state legislatures, so they were more like the House of Lords than today's elected officials. One could easily buy a senate seat back then.

The third level of government, which from the British model is the monarch, is the President who is both head of government and head of state, also elected but not directly. In Britain, the monarch is hereditary and by the late 1700's had devolved only into the head of state while the head of government was the prime minister. I believe the President became both because the country needed some serious unifying at the time. Later, it turned out that presidential scandals caused more grief to running the government as it left the whole model kind of rudderless.

The newest innovation in representative government at the time was the Supreme Court. Originally, it was designed to arbitrate between the states with laws passed federally by Congress. It eventually became another check and balance between Congress and the President. It is not an elected body, but appointed by the President. Somewhere along the way, as Presidents couldn't get much done without Congress who controlled the purse strings, justices needed to be approved by them. Hence, a Supreme Court justice is also, kind of, elected. The idea of a Supreme Court was later adopted in Britain as well.

One other innovation that founding fathers came up with was the Electoral College, which means the President is not directly elected by the population. Sold as another way to give smaller states protection from larger states, it was really created on the founding fathers' fear of the general population. They were worried a direct vote could make an idiot the President, which is kind of funny because, like every other country in the world, the US has had a few dolts sit in the White House over its 230 year existence. Now, why the founding fathers were worried is hard to understand. At the time, only 6% of the population could vote. The rules were set by the states and you needed to own land or pay taxes. As income taxes were something no one would think up until 1917, that meant those taxes were business taxes from business men. I'm not sure men like those could elect a fool. An ambitious manipulative individual, yes, and the Electoral College would not protect from such a man. The Electoral Colleges were also put in the control of the states, along

with drawing congressional boundaries for the House of Representatives and the rules for who can vote. I think we are all aware of the abuses there.

So representative government, like everything else in the world, is subjected to abuse. And when that abuse becomes so blatant, it causes people to protest or walk away. The established system makes it so hard to change archaic rules that may have made sense 200 years ago, but are being taken advantage of now. No system is perfect, but a good system should be modified to adjust for the times and abuses.

All I can say is, whatever you do, vote.

Next month, Canada. We're no "shining example" either.