

Democracy is Hard: Part 3

Representative Government

Canada



There were, unfortunately, no great principles on which parties were divided – politics became a mere struggle for office.
– **Sir John A. MacDonald, Canada's First Prime Minister.**

I'll start today with an outline of Canadian Federal Government. It consists of two houses, the House of Parliament and the Senate, similar to the British model. The House of Commons consists of elected Members (MP) from ridings (equivalent to US congressional districts) across the country. The Senate is appointed—by the Prime Minister, but don't exercise any real power past reviewing legislation. In fact, they do have power to stop legislation, but dare not do so for fear of the Senate being abolished, being an appointed body and all.

This is the true nature of Canadian representative government. There is an incredible amount of power localized in the Prime Minister's Office (the PMO). Although jurisdictions have been separated between the federal and provincial levels, the federal government infringes on provincial jurisdictions all the time with relative impunity. The Prime Minister has more power over Canada than the President of the United States has over his country.

Well, there is a check and balance of sorts. Where in the US, the President is elected semi-directly (Electoral College), the Prime Minister must have the support of his party AND get elected to a seat in the House of Commons. So, if the PM starts to get out of line, it is actually in the best interests of his party MPs to remove him from the office because if they don't, the populace will at the next election. That will include removal of many of those same MPs and hand the government over to another party. Hence, the above quote up at the beginning. Staying elected trumps your principles and the policies of all are parties are not that far away from each other, even now in today's extremist political landscape. Our conservative party is also "socialist" because socialist ideas have been imbedded into our political fabric so deeply that trying to take any of it away will relegate you

to the dustbin of history. Unfortunately, modifying and/or modernizing those policies is also extremely difficult. But I digress.

Getting back to why all that power is centralized in the PMO, we have to go back to 1867. America had just been through a devastating civil war, one where the British had been trading with the South to keep a supply of cotton moving past the North's port blockade. Canada was a British colony. When the war ended, Canada's ties to Britain became a target. In 1866, Fenian raids began. Irish soldiers started coming across the border and causing havoc. On one such occasion, a fair sized group came across at Buffalo NY determined to conquer Canada for the United States. They were met with a contingent of Canadian militia at Ridgeway, near Fort Erie.

The Fenians were trained Union soldiers of Irish descent, so they had two reasons for wanting to kick the British out of North America. The Canadian militia advanced on them, but retreated from the field due to a miscommunication. If they would have continued forward, they would have found the main force of the experienced Fenians and most likely would have been badly defeated.

With the Fenian victory, it is said that they all got drunk and went home. In actual fact, they heard that more militia and British regulars were forming up to advance on them at Fort Erie. The American gunboat USS Michigan was in the Niagara River, stopping Fenian military reinforcements from crossing over. So they headed back over the border where American authorities, not too happy with them, took their guns and sent them home.

It wasn't much of an invasion, but it pushed the nascent confederation plan forward. The debate for the form of the government was the sticking point. Quebec (known as Canada East at the time) was largely French. New Brunswick and Nova Scotia were smaller colonies. As Britain didn't have three levels of government (local, state/province, federal), going totally on a British model was not acceptable to the individual colonies. So the American model was looked at. There, they saw that strong powers given state legislatures (the only way the founding fathers could form a country amongst the individual states) allowed for the South's secession and the eventual Civil War. Therefore, more powers were given to the federal government. The Prime Minister was modelled off the British one, hence the concentration of power.

Now, technically until very recently, elections in Canada can be called by the Prime Minister at any time he likes, limited only by a five year term. It was supposed to be four, but there was enough wiggle room put in to stretch it to five. Now, the end date is pretty much fixed at four years. Therefore, any time the Prime Minister does something bad and loses the "confidence" of the majority of the MPs, he can be forced to call an election or, if his party is mad at him, he can just be removed or forced to resign. That is much cleaner than trying to remove a sitting president in the United States, but not easy by any sense when you have MPs tied to the power of the PMO. On the flip side, if the government is extremely popular for some reason during the term, a snap election could be called to extend that end date out further. This policy, I believe, has been squashed by the new fixed term law as well, so only losing the confidence of the majority of MPs can trigger an election before the four year term is up.

For the Senate, it was initially appointed by the British crown, much like their House of Lords. They were large landowners and distributed regionally, sort of like the US Senate, so no one region could get away with exploiting another due to population numbers. Over the years, the PMO took to

recommending senators that were then rubber stamped by the Crown's representative in Canada, the Governor-General. Eventually, it became nothing more than retired political hacks to rubber stamp legislation. It is considered a patronage position now and many Canadians can't figure out why we pay some of these hacks, some of whom rarely, if ever, so up to work.

In conclusion, government systems must evolve to remain effective. Models designed back in 1789 and 1867 were fine for their times, but people find ways to exploit the holes when new situations arise in the future. The "Establishment" has a vested interest in not changing the way the model works for them and democracy dies a little bit each day. It does come down to getting elected, so you can stay at the public trough, overrules principles every time. Keeping the system the way it is makes that easier.