

Someone on the Fair Vote list asked about parties in municipal politics. Here was my bit about it.

Well, I have an opinion about whether it is preferable to have political parties in municipal elections. Yes, it is and no it is not.

Having political parties would be better than what we have now, but far short of the best arrangement. The best arrangement would be a system based on subsidiarity and conferral, but this is so far outside the comprehension of the typical middle Canadian wonk that I am reluctant to even start trying to explain it. By best, I mean the best anyone has gone so far.

Subsidiarity means that things are done at the lowest competent level. A federal government does nothing except what the provinces cannot do. A province does nothing except what municipal government cannot competently do. A municipal government does nothing except what community governments cannot competently do. A community government does nothing except what a neighborhood level of government cannot do. Do you grasp that; neighborhood level of government?

Now do you get it that a higher level of government should have these powers only because they are conferred on them by a lower level of government? In other words, a community level of government only comes into existence because the neighborhoods of that area require it in order to deal with what they cannot deal with individually. Then communities set up a city government to deal with what they are incompetent to deal with, the municipal governments set up a provincial or regional government, and in the same way a national government comes about.

You see that this is the opposite of how government came about in this country and in most countries, and how they function; bottom up versus top down. In a real democracy, the only general elections are at the lowest level, where all the people can gather together and vote for people they can see and know. The larger the election, the more mass media is involved, and the less democratic it is.

It is because we have elections like this that political parties are a necessary evil. They serve two related purposes. One is so that the voters have some idea of what they are voting for. This is why most people are interested in parties and their programs, not personalities. The other purpose is to exert some discipline over political representatives.

You can see the effect of a lack of effective political parties in the American congress and the Toronto city council. In Toronto you have 44 political parties. No, 45. Each Toronto councillor, each yankee congressman, treats his/her/its position like a business.

However, you will have noticed in recent times the elites have learned to circumvent even the minimal protection offered by party systems. They can coopt parties from the left to the right. We can vote for neo-fascism light, regular or heavy duty. The public interest is not on the menu.

Even the strongest proportional systems only mildly restrain neo-fascism. This is why I no longer think of PR as a necessary intermediate stage before moving to a strong democracy. I see much of the world, especially the Latin Americans, some European countries, moving fairly rapidly toward a subsidiarity and conferral system, with representative structures starting to lose power and authority.

I want to cut to the chase and get to a strong democracy. The neofascists are moving too fast and so is Harper. I want. But this is avant-colonial Canada; it will happen here last and then they will act like they invented it.

So I am starting to get tired of hearing about voting systems, especially when people cannot get beyond why proportional is better. That debate should be long over. What I want to hear about from all these experts on voting systems is how a neighborhood council, the basic building block of a real democracy, would function.

How does a neighborhood council of all the people in a geographic area small enough for them all to gather in one place, go about deciding in a consensual way what positions they want their delegates to take at the community council? How do they receive reports back from the community council? How do they choose these delegates?

Of course, the way to get these kinds of community groups started is at the municipal level. This is what people should be demanding from city council. This is what a local chapter of Fair Vote Canada might do. Instead the Toronto chapter is neatly spiked by this stupid AV vs STV thing.

But how do you get a new political system except by working through the existing system, unless you want to "smash" it? If you want a fundamental change you do not try working through existing parties or even a "no party" structure. That is what a party is supposed to do, carry out an agenda. Otherwise it is just a system of distributing patronage.

So, there is the answer to your question, my dear Ringer. A political party would be a good idea in municipal politics if it had something constructive to do. Its real goal should be to make itself obsolete by bringing in a post partisan era.

But formal political parties, connected with the provincial parties, and with all their sleaze, would be better than the mess we have now.

Now, how about everybody on this list googling up "participatory democracy?"

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