

THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT: SHOULD THIS BE PAUL MARTIN'S NEXT BIG IDEA?

Thomas S. Axworthy

After successfully erasing Canada's fiscal deficit as finance minister, Paul Martin has identified "the democratic deficit" as one of the most urgent issues as he becomes prime minister. Thomas Axworthy, Chairman of the Centre for the Study of Democracy at Queen's University, agrees that Martin has identified three critical issues — low election turnouts by a disengaged public, a lack of accountability in government and relevance of Parliament, and the need for international governance in a globalized economy. Axworthy, himself a former principal secretary to a prime minister, offers some pertinent suggestions on how Martin might flesh out his ideas for eliminating the democratic deficit.

Après avoir épongé le déficit public à titre de ministre des Finances, Paul Martin a fait du « déficit démocratique » l'une des questions à régler d'urgence au poste de premier ministre. Avec raison, estime Thomas Axworthy, président du Centre for the Study of Democracy de Queen's University, pour qui M. Martin a judicieusement identifié trois domaines critiques en la matière : faible participation électorale d'une population désengagée ; imputabilité du gouvernement et pertinence du Parlement ; gouvernance internationale dans une économie mondialisée. Ayant lui-même été premier secrétaire d'un chef de gouvernement, l'auteur y va d'intéressantes suggestions sur les moyens d'étoffer les idées de Paul Martin sur l'élimination de ce déficit démocratique.



In an important speech delivered to Osgoode law students on October 21, 2002, Paul Martin articulated a central theme of his leadership campaign — the democratic deficit — and how he proposed to reform Parliament “because under our democratic tradition, it is the House of Commons where our greatest debates should occur; where duly elected Members of Parliament come together from every corner of our country and represent every community and constituency in between.” Martin’s emphasis on parliamentary reform was tactically brilliant because his core supporters in the Liberal caucus had long been dissatisfied with their treatment by Jean Chrétien’s PMO, but more fundamentally, Martin also recognized that “democratic and institutional renewal” was a “vital precondition to our future success as a country.” If Martin is serious about democratic renewal and willing to extend his agenda beyond parliamentary reform to a much wider canvas, he might be promoting the most galvanizing political idea since Pierre Trudeau’s advocacy of a “Just Society.”

As democracy was first being invented, classical Greece developed a concept of citizenship that we are still far from

attaining. In his famous funeral oration to Athenians, Pericles declared, “we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business: we say he has no business here at all.” The classical idea was that political community was a good in itself, and that our humanity would be diminished if we were not engaged in civic business. Aristotle claimed that by nature we were political animals and therefore that without full membership in a self-governing community we would live a life less than fully human, no better in fact than slaves.

Since classical times humankind has invented representative institutions — parliament — as a means of achieving self-government in large communities when it is no longer possible to draw every citizen to the Pnyx hills to vote in a direct assembly, and mass democracy where the United States in 1828 first extended the vote beyond the property-owning class to include farmers, labourers, and mechanics. Our ideal today is an engaged citizenry on a mass scale, an ambitious goal, much like our ideal of universal public education. Just as we strive for mass literacy in

reading or mathematics, so too must we strive for mass civic literacy. Citizen capacity is not only the ability to secure our rights and influence decision makers, participation itself is a critical good. As Charles Taylor describes this ideal:

Full participation in self-rule is seen as being able, at least part of the time, to have some part in the forming of a ruling consensus, with which one can identify along with others. To rule and be ruled in turn means that at least some of the time the governors can be 'us' and not always 'them.'

Jurgen Habermas, who has popularized the concept of "deliberative democracy," a citizen engagement beyond the simple act of voting, writes that active citizenship "no longer hinges on the assumption of macro-subjects like the 'people' of the 'community' but anonymously interlinked discourses or flows of communication." Citizens should vote but, just as important, deliberations within the decision-making bodies like parliament should be open for and sensitive to the values and contributions of ordinary citizens. This is a much wider agenda than procedural democracy for it requires innovation in how our decision-making bodies operate. Reducing the democratic deficit therefore requires action on three urgent fronts, not just the parliamentary focus initially identified in Martin's Osgoode speech. They are:

- Democratic civic literacy, especially among our disengaged young
- Democratic accountability in our institutions of governance, including parties, the Senate, House of Commons, and the public service

- Democratic international governance to bring some measure of political accountability to the forces of globalization. Slowly changing macro-forces rarely force political attention until it is too late and a crisis hits us with a

Slowly changing macro-forces rarely force political attention until it is too late and a crisis hits us with a gale force: Thus rising prices slowly start to accelerate bit by bit and suddenly you are in an inflationary spiral or deficits begin to accumulate and eventually you are in a debt trap borrowing money to pay interest on yesterday's loans. With the democratic deficit we are in a similar situation today.

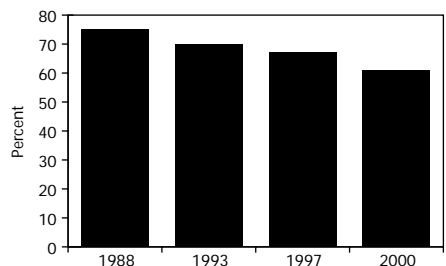
gale force: Thus rising prices slowly start to accelerate bit by bit and suddenly you are in an inflationary spiral or deficits begin to accumulate and eventually you are in a debt trap borrowing money to pay interest on yesterday's loans. With the democratic deficit we are in a similar situation today — all the trend lines on voting, the easiest form of civic engagement, are down, and with youthful voters they are in a free-fall. For a generation, the young have endured a cycle of neglect and now they are opting out of the political system in unprecedented numbers. The first item in any democratic agenda must be to end the disengagement of our youth from politics. The way to do so is first to increase their basic civic literacy and next to put on the policy agenda issues that address their concerns about jobs and education access.

The 2000 election had the lowest recorded turnout in a federal election since Confederation. At 61 percent, the turnout was 14 points below the 75 percent rate achieved in 1988, which was itself the average of elections 1945-1988. Turnout has declined from 75 percent in 1988 to 70 percent in 1993 to 67 percent in 1997 to 61 percent in 2000. The explanation for the decline is quite straight/forward: turnout has not declined in the electorate as a whole but it has fallen like a stone among Canadians born after

1970. Novelist Douglas Copeland has described his generation as "Generation X," and among Generation X-ers, non-voting increased by 14 points between 1993 and 2000. In the 2000 election, for example, 83 percent of those over 68 voted, while only 22 percent of those 18-20 voted. In short, only 25 percent of youth voters 18-20 participate in elections compared to 75 percent for those 40 years old and up. We have a disengaged, if not disaffected, youthful generation that has turned off politics.

Reasons for nonvoting are complex but there are clear correlations between knowledge, personal efficacy, and voting. The more people know about our history and political institutions the more likely they are to participate in political life. If this assumption is correct we should not be surprised by the decline in youth participation because there has also been a generation of educational neglect in our schools about history and civics. Barely a majority of youth know that Sir John A. Macdonald was our first prime minister, so it should not come as a surprise that only 22 percent of those 18-27 in 2000 could identify the minister of finance. The Council of Education Ministers needs to make civic literacy as great an education priority as language arts or numeracy. The federal Department of Heritage would be much wiser making a financial contribution to the Council of Education Ministers for civics education, rather than giving away Canadian flags.

VOTER TURNOUT IN FEDERAL ELECTIONS FROM 1988 TO 2000





CP Photo

Paul Martin's world: the new Liberal leader meets reporters on Parliament Hill. In redressing "the democratic deficit," Martin has promised to restore the pre-eminent role of Parliament as the place where the great debates of the day occur.

It is part of this vicious circle of disengagement that issues of primary concern to young people are seldom discussed. Youth do not vote so politicians do not listen which further alienates the young and so it goes spiralling ever downwards. Access to higher education, rising tuition fees, and student debt levels must be part of any future productivity agenda. Ireland has prospered not only by cutting corporate taxes but by increasing access to higher education. Thanks to Jacques Hébert, Canada has private sector/philanthropic initiatives like Canada World Youth and Katimavik but no national youth service program like AmeriCorp in the United States. Giving a young person an option

of community service in the transition from high school to work or high school to higher education would be a concrete way of showing our young people that they matter as well as giving domestic and international communities valuable projects. Engaging young people in their communities would be the best kind of active citizenship.

Accountability — the requirement to answer for the responsibility of having been given power by citizens — is at the heart of democratic government. Answering the question, who is responsible to whom for what, is the key concept in self-government. For citizens to be engaged they must

know who to hold accountable for what but in Canada this key requirement is hopelessly muddled. The electoral system no longer does a very good job in translating voter preference into responsible government, the parties no longer seem to be very good at political education or articulating their value systems, the Senate remains appointed, the House of Commons no longer has the means to hold the executive accountable for its actions, and the public service has forgotten the distinction between clients and citizens. To reduce the democratic deficit we must restore accountability to every one of our political institutions.

Elections are not just about representation, they are also about forming an effective executive, and this central point is often lost in the critique of our first-past-the-post electoral system. Elections must be about aggregating interests as well as articulating interests. Canada's electoral system does this well and one of Canada's international advantages is that we have a parliamentary system that enables our governments to take decisions.

But any system can be improved and our system, based on strong regional identities, has discriminated against many Canadian voters. Thus Liberal support in the West is not translated into seats, as is Conservative support in Quebec, or Green Party support anywhere. One reason for declining turnout may be the feeling that "my vote doesn't count" because the system only responds to concentrated local majorities. Keeping the basic geographic first-past-the-post system for 80 percent of the seats in the House of Commons but allocating 20 percent of the seats according to regional vote shares would not unduly impair effectiveness while improving representation. Allocating some Members of Parliament to party lists would also increase the representation of women, aboriginals, and visible minorities, most of whom have difficulties in winning party nominations.

Parties are not just about winning elections, they are also about educating citizens about issues and ideologies. Parties in some countries take this responsibility seriously. In Canada they do not. To his great credit, fairness in party election financing was addressed by Jean Chrétien in his final burst of reform which led to Bill C-24, which included public subsidies and restricted corporate and union financing. In future, parties will receive the vast proportion of their finances from taxpayers, and voters have the right to ask how their money is being used. German parties each have independent

think tanks and education foundations to develop policy and debate ideas. German parties are more than electoral machines. As part of the subsidy authorized by C-24, at least 10 percent of the total should be allocated to pub-

Elections are not just about representation, they are also about forming an effective executive and this central point is often lost in the critique of our first-past-the-post electoral system. Elections must be about aggregating interests as well as articulating interests.

lic education. Mr. Martin can especially lead here. In an enormously successful fundraising appeal for his leadership campaign, it is reputed that Martin raised \$10-12 million. After paying off his campaign debts, the residue could be used to create a Liberal Party Education Foundation.

Senate reform must also be part of any democratic agenda. To have an appointed Senate a century after we achieved universal suffrage in electing the House of Commons is a dubious and poor joke on Canadian citizens. Without formally changing the constitution our new prime minister can begin by only appointing senators who have stood for election and agreed to resign after a fixed term of four years. Once this system becomes established de facto, in time it can be institutionalized by constitutional amendment.

In raising the democratic deficit as a major campaign theme in the fall of 2002, Martin began with a six-point plan to reform the House of Commons. He based his rationale squarely on the principles of accountability:

Under our system of representative government, there should be a direct line that runs from the people to their representatives — their Member of Parliament — and through them to the executive. The problem is, over time, that line has become obscured. Unfortunately, the authority of the individual Member of Parliament has been allowed to erode while the power of the executive has grown steadily.

All six of his ideas, including an independent ethics commissioner, a renewed system of private member's bills, fewer three-line whips (government confidence votes), the selection of committee chairman by

the committee itself, committee review of government appointments, and enhanced measures to review estimates should be implemented. But even more needs to be done. Parliament needs sources of expertise and research comparable to the executive. The Privy Council Office and the Department of Finance, with no program responsibilities, have between them 1500-2000 policy experts whose only job is to advise the Cabinet. The 300 Members of Parliament have only 80 researchers in the Library of Parliament. As Patrick Boyer, a former Member of Parliament, writes in his cri de coeur, *Just Trust Us*: "for most MP's, getting to Parliament Hill is like going to play hockey in an arena but finding no ice to skate on." To regain control of the expenditure process, Parliament needs a source of expertise like the Congressional Budget Office in the United States whose budget forecasts are much more reliable than the president's. Each of the major committees of parliament should have a research staff that can build up expertise and memory over time. The institution of Parliamentary Secretary, once a linchpin between Members of Parliament and the executive, should also be restored to its former prominence. Pierre Trudeau and Jean Chrétien both served as parliamentary secretary to the prime minister. Politics is a craft, not a science, and there should be an apprenticeship beginning as a member, then a chairperson of a committee, then parliamentary secretary, junior minister, and finally a senior position.

Parliament, too, should be the centre of the action on public consultations. Ottawa is swarming with consultations but most of them are run by departments. Running a process of deliberative democracy about values, trade-offs, and mutual learning should be the job of politicians not public servants. Politicians bring energy and ideas to the political system, public servants bring expertise and management. We should give parliament the resources to engage with Canadians about future directions or goals while restricting public servants to meeting with the public on implementation or means.

On accountability criteria, the public service of Canada is a mess. Starting in the 1980s, the public service in a burst of faddism adopted the "new public management" which attempted to introduce business standards into government. But business has a bottom line — profits or loss — while government has multiple goals: winning elections, running a fair process, keeping the country united, social equality, and service efficiency to mention only a few. Citizens became customers or clients and, as customers, departments engaged in an endless series of discussions to see what the client wanted. Decision-making in Ottawa is now a never-ending series of consultations between civil servants, lobbyists, and service providers, mostly held in private with no public accountability. To restore political accountability this iron triangle has to be broken. While adding layers and layers of middle management to engage in consultations, the public service has also lost all notions of frugality or value for money.

Delegated the power to assign merit bonuses for "superior performance," deputy ministers reward them willy-nilly making a mockery of the process. Meanwhile the Justice Department has a billion-dollar overrun on gun registration, the Department of Human Resources has an ongoing series of scandals, and the

Department of Public Works is bullied into breaking all the rules in awarding communications contracts. Like Great Britain, which makes permanent secretaries "accountability officers" answerable to Parliament for the honest administration of their department, we too should make deputy ministers as accountable for administration as ministers are for policy.

It is not only Canadian citizens and members of Parliament who suffer from a democratic deficit. Most of the world is underrepresented in institutions of world governance like the UN Security Council, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. Demonstrators in Seattle or Quebec City were

Paul Martin is the man most responsible for slaying Canada's fiscal deficit. He has also importantly raised the issue of Canada's democratic deficit. If he succeeds in reforming Canada's political institutions to truly engage our citizenry he will put his earlier deficit-busting accomplishments in the shade.

forcibly making the point that in a globalized world they were being vitally affected by globalization's impact while having no voice on globalization's direction. There is a huge gap between the private power of international commerce and the lack of power by most states in the international system. Developing an international government and agenda to run in tandem with galloping economic forces is a tall order but it too must be addressed. Worthy of an article on its own, some ideas for an international democratic governance agenda that Canada could champion include the following:

- Insist that a representative of the developing world become President of the World Bank. Why are all important world economic institutions reserved for first-world management?

- Expand the G-8 to include Brazil, Nigeria, South Africa, India, and when it finally democratizes, China
- Work to reform the Security Council to include as permanent members countries like Japan, Germany, India, Brazil, and South Africa
- Create a Civil Society Assembly of NGOs to meet concurrently with the General Assembly

Canadians are not only citizens of this territorial state, they are also citizens of the world, and world institutions are in desperate need of more democratic accountability.

Paul Martin is the man most responsible for slaying Canada's fiscal deficit. He has also importantly raised the issue of Canada's democratic deficit. If he succeeds in reforming Canada's political institutions to truly engage our citizenry he will put his earlier deficit-busting accomplishments in the shade. Balancing a budget is momentary; balancing institutional power to achieve better accountability could be fundamental and long lasting. Widening and deepening his democratic deficit agenda also has the advantage that in a time of scarce fiscal resources it doesn't cost much. Indeed, de-layering the public service, establishing single point administrative accountability for deputy ministers, and restoring Parliament's ability to scrutinize expenditures and evaluate performance could even save money. Democratic accountability could do for Paul Martin what the Just Society did for Pierre Trudeau: give his government an easily understood conceptual framework. For Prime Minister Paul Martin his guiding purpose should be Democracy First.

Thomas S. Axworthy, former principal secretary to Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, is Chairman of the Centre for the Study of Democracy at Queen's University, and Executive Director of the Historica Foundation.