

SUMMARY of NOTES from CITIZENS ASSEMBLY for DEMOCRACY meeting

March 20, 2010

[- Michaele Kustudic]

The fifth meeting of the group which has now adopted the name Citizens Assembly for Democracy (CAfD) took place on March 20th, in Room 132 of the BAC. David Mangle had again graciously agreed to act as the Facilitator of the discussion.

Gerri Robertson reported that she had carried out her commitment, made at our last meeting, to draft a letter to MP Derek Lee, expressing our support for his stated intent to hold the government of Canada in contempt of Parliament, for its failure to submit to Parliament, as requested, relevant documents regarding the treatment of detainees handed over to Afghan authorities by the Canadian military. A number of our members had signed on to the letter, which Gerri had then sent to 120 MP's. (BQ MP's were not included in the mail-out, because of difficulty obtaining translation into French.) Gerri had received replies to the letter from several MP's, including Hon. Jack Layton.

Janet E then raised the subject of the 'homework' assignment to which some of our members had agreed at the March 6th meeting. Janet herself had done her 'homework', by providing a link with the CAPP (Canadians Advocating Political Participation) group (a group which has developed from the original nation-wide Facebook movement against Prorogation, a few weeks ago). She reported that someone on the CAPP site had connected with our own website, and had reported that a 'National Day of Discussion' is being planned for May 15th. This would hopefully encourage like-minded groups across the country to share their views on issues of mutual concern. Janet distributed printed pages, listing all the communities in Canada which so far had signed up to be involved, including our own. Our group confirmed an interest in participating in this May 15th event. Janet volunteered to be the Contact Person to connect us to the national group. We briefly discussed the possibility of forming a committee for the event, perhaps to plan a potluck supper or other facilitating gathering.

Referring back to the 'How' vs 'What' issue we had discussed at our last meeting, Peggy Hope-Simpson remarked that exercising our democratic right is the How; we have to decide on the various areas or issues we wish to discuss. As areas she considers important, she suggested the Economy; the Environment; and Climate Change as urgent issues we might choose to address.

Since some new members had joined the group since the last gathering, we briefly went around the group, with each member introducing her/himself. A brief re-cap of our discussions until now was then given, touching on Prorogation, issues regarding democracy, and our responsibilities as citizens, as we see them.

Gradually, the conversation turned to, 'OK, so what are we going to be ABOUT?' From the first meeting, we had had a large list of other, related concerns, not merely the prorogation issue itself. We re-capped a few of these: link with CAPP via the Net; producing our song-&-dance number on the day of the re-opening of Parliament and getting it up on Youtube - both of these have been accomplished.

Henry B. suggested that we compile a list of our 'complaints'; what is it, exactly, that we are dissatisfied with in our democracy as it is (e.g. too much power concentrated in the PMO). He

felt that there is a need to distinguish between problems with the system, and complaints against specific individuals. Governments do NOT carry out the wishes of the majority of the people, and appear to be paying less and less attention to what citizens want.

From this came the observation that the televising of Question Period in Parliament had definitely 'lowered the tone' of discourse among MP's, who often appear to be 'playing to the camera', in their attempts to structure 'the narrative'. George St. Amour reminded us of something said at the last meeting by Skip H. (who was not present this time, and whose sharp observations and ascerbic wit were missed), ie "Don't let 'Them' steal the movie!". Amy added that "rich, evil people" have the money to buy the coverage they want, reminding us that inequality in the distribution of wealth in the country is at the base of this problem, as indeed it is of many of the issues we are grappling with.

At this point David M pointed out how very 'well-behaved' this group of ours is, compared with our Parliamentarians in the House of Commons! Everyone must be prepared to give up some of their 'individual power', he reminded us, in order to facilitate civilized exchanges of ideas. It is "a problem of culture".

Gerri cogently remarked that lack of participation by citizens is a big part of the problem. No one communicates to our elected representatives what we think about what they are doing and how they are behaving. So, what are we going to do to try to change "the culture"??

Henry then suggested a couple of more items he would like to see added to our list of 'complaints': the influence of powerful groups on government (he referred specifically to the so-called Security Prosperity Partnership or SPP, an initiative which has been being pushed by groups such as the Canadian Council of Chief Executives [CCCE] [does it have a newer name now? I can't remember ...] for several years); also, problems with our voting system and the need for changes to the present 'first-past-the-post' system.

Janet reminded us that it is important to constantly bring forward and review 'what has already been done'.

Michael Bawtree then brought up the interesting story of the Joseph Howe Initiative, in 1884: At that time, 'bad behaviour' on the part of representatives in The Nova Scotia Legislature, in the presence of a visitor from Russia, resulted in Howe taking action to keep an eye on the politicians, and monitoring how they were conducting themselves in the assembly. (I HOPE this is correct ... I must admit I am not terribly well-informed about Joseph Howe's accomplishments, and I was writing as fast as I could ...) From this story was born the suggestion that our group might form 'deputations' which would be present at sessions of the Legislature, to keep an eye on the politicians and to let them know that their childish behaviour will not be tolerated by the electorate. Obviously our group would have to focus its attentions on the Nova Scotia Legislature, but if the idea were to catch on, and to spread through contact and communication with CAPP, it could ultimately expand to groups forming to keep an eye on Parliament itself.

Peggy expressed her agreement with this idea, stating that the observers who would monitor the sessions could then report back to our local group, to the media, and to the Speaker of the House, regarding what had been observed.

Darrell Slauenwhite, a new member to our group, mentioned that he has scheduled a meeting

with Scott Brison on April 6th, and would be pleased to bring up the subject of our distaste for the 'disgraceful' behaviour of MP's during Question period, with him.

From here, the conversation shifted to the oft-discussed issue of the need for more emphasis on the rudiments of Democracy in educational curricula, in order to 'put politics and democracy back into the minds of our youth'. Perhaps we could speak to teachers of Social Studies, it was suggested. Could we perhaps arrange to come in to speak to some of their classes?

There seemed to be a slight tension, at this point, between the concepts of the need to focus on keeping this educational issue in context, ie keeping in mind the impact of school curriculum on the 'Big Picture', and having faith in the process of 'democracy' by letting the discussion take its own course, and unfold as it will.

"Both points are valid", remarked our ever-diplomatic Facilitator.

Regarding 'instant democracy', Gerri commented that the 'modern' way of pushing forward an agenda ("fighting this war", were her actual words ...) is via the World Wide Web. Amy suggested that one thing we might do is to compile an on-going list of issues which have been brought up for discussion, with a quick synopsis of what has happened to date at the beginning of each meeting, to which anyone can add new ideas or issues.

Several ideas for reaching 'the populace' were suggested at this point: Janet suggested an essay contest for young people. Michael referred to the organization AVAAZ, and how successful it has been in collecting support for recent campaigns on various issues. Could we not put together, through CAPP, a similar network to draw attention to and gather support for our issues? Janet offered to find out more about this possibility before the next meeting.

Amy volunteered to start up a Facebook group, to publicize CAfD meetings, and what we are hoping to accomplish. This might prove helpful in engaging more of the youthful population in the community.

At this point, our Facilitator asked if we were ready to start focusing on becoming more 'action-oriented'. All seemed to agree that we were. If one doesn't have a specific 'assignment', commented Gerri, things tend not to get done. She referred to the letter to MP Lee which she had written, because she had made a specific commitment to the group to do so.

David then went on to start pulling together and clarifying the excellent suggestions which had been made during the discussion:

- 1) First we focused on the idea of monitoring politicians' behaviour in the NS Legislature. We should let the Media know ahead of time what we are doing, it was suggested. It should not be a 'one-shot' event, and should not always involve the same individuals as observers. We should do it in small groups of 2 to 6, someone mentioned. Michael has a Joe Howe costume, he informed us - this could perhaps be used to generate some interest among the press and the public (as 'street theatre' usually does).

Those who put their names forward as being interested in working on this 'DEMOCRACY WATCH' project were: Michael; Peggy; Malcolm; Gerri; Michaele; Maxine

2) The next idea to be 'fleshed out' was one which had been raised by Skip H at our previous meeting, ie the development and promotion of an ECONOMIC BILL OF RIGHTS. Those who expressed an interest in working on this, together, hopefully, with Skip, were: Jim Ruddy; Janet; Bruce McCulloch

The underlying idea, it was suggested, would be, how broad economic models impact our democracy, and on building a bridge between working class activists and the broader issues.

3) The need for a MISSION STATEMENT was next addressed. A list of 'complaints', or 'what's wrong', could be included (as an addendum, David suggested).

It should be an 'evolving' Mission statement, someone suggested, in order not to 'tie ourselves down' too rigidly as we move forward with our evolving ideas about Democracy. It could be online, our resident computer-wiz Malcolm remarked. In this way, people could add to it. The facilitating software is available, 'for free', he told us.

Those expressing an interest in working on this project are - Janet; Henry; Marke; Susan H

4) Regarding preparations for the MAY 15th CROSS-CANADA DISCUSSION event: Someone suggested that the Raging Grannies participate. ("They'll be there, whether they are invited or not!" Bill Z exclaimed.) Someone else suggested that some 'Raging Grandchildren' be added to the mix. (Personally, as a Raging Granny myself, that doesn't sound like a very workable idea to me, as we have enough trouble managing ourselves ...! That's just my feeling, however ...)

Several individuals offered to serve as a 'steering group' for this project - Gerri; Janet; Elizabeth F. (and possibly Jim R, and maybe others - I couldn't write fast enough to keep up, at this point).

5) Re: the idea of working on ideas related to the feasibility of moving toward the concept of a COALITION GOVERNMENT: It was agreed that each of the several people who expressed interest in working on this project would do a little research on an aspect of the question, and come to the next meeting prepared to add to our mutual 'education' by making a small presentation on the area they had researched. Michael offered to head up this group.

Bill Z commented that there needs to be a pamphlet produced regarding the subject of Proportional Representation, since we are in a unique situation with a 5-party system, but no 'prop rep'. This is an issue which would have to be addressed, if a Coalition government were ever to become a serious possibility.

Peggy said that we need to be careful about using the term 'coalition', because it is 'easy to shoot down'. Perhaps 'co-operation' might be a more acceptable term. The NDP and the BQ are, in fact, supporting each other at this time, on various issues. But Michael's suggestion, at this point, is only for the purpose of research, to find out when coalition governments have in fact existed, and how well they have worked.

Michael has a list of the people who offered to work on these mini-research tasks, and will assign a topic to each.

6) Maxine Barrett raised the possibility of our establishing a 'SPEAKERS CORNER' in Wolfville, modelled on the idea of the one in Hyde Park in London. This would require very little in the way of organization. Clock Tower Park would be an excellent choice of venue; it is 'public space', so apparently no permission would be required, and it is at the 'crossroads' between the town and the university campus. This undertaking could be part of our May 15th activities, or could even be set up before that. "This [would be] an example of 'democracy in action'", Michael commented - spontaneous, not too scripted (though, as Bruce pointed out, would-be speakers should have their ideas 'scripted out', and be prepared to hand their notes to media who might report on the event, in order not to be misquoted). Maxine will work on moving forward with this idea, perhaps coming up with some 'guidelines'. Ann A offered to help.

7) EDUCATING OURSELVES & OTHERS 20 minutes of each meeting could be set aside in which people could 'report back' to the group about specific topics they have researched. A separate section of our web-site could be set up for a Bibliography about the various research topics. Susan H asked that a List of possible Topics be generated. Jim suggested [or offered?] that a 'curriculum' be drawn up - a list of books people could read to aid in our understanding of how 'The System' works.

In addition to these ideas, we can all, as individuals, write letters on relevant topics (and post them on our website?), make calls to phone-in shows, etc., to move our issues forward in the public consciousness.

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"We never lack good ideas to come up with!", David remarked.

At this point we discussed alternate times for our meetings, other than Saturday afternoons, which a number of people find inconvenient. After a short exchange, we decided to try *early on Friday evening*.

So, the time scheduled for the next meeting is: FRIDAY APRIL 5th 5:00 to 6:30 pm again in BAC Room 132.

Sarah has already kindly booked the room for our use at that time.

- submitted by Michaele Kustudic