

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

REFLECTIONS ON DEMOCRACY

A MINOR PAPER

EDER 655.07 L01

PREPARED FOR DR. Y.M. HEBERT

GRADUATE DIVISION OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

BY

FRANK VAN DOORN

CALGARY, ALBERTA

FEBRUARY 2006

INTRODUCTION

The following series of four reflections on democracy is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the course “The Struggle for Democracy”. It is somewhat fitting that the struggle to choose only four readings from among many should be as arduous as the development of democracy itself has been. This may also be a sign of our times in that democracies, as forms of government, are now by far in majority world wide and yet there still remains a struggle for different kinds of democracy other than the actual “franchise” within these democracies.

“Pure” democracy, that is, all people voting on all issues all the time, does not work in our overly populated and complicated world. We have neither the time nor the inclination to research all topics in order to make informed decisions. Most often we do not care about the issue at hand, in effect we would leave it to minorities, interested parties either in favour or not in favour, to make decisions. Pure democracy is, therefore, ineffective, it actually describes “manic” minority tyranny where the minority changes with every issue at hand reflecting only those small minorities involved. A dictatorship would be the next logical step for government. To improve on this problem we elect representatives to a body called “government”.

By electing representatives we are making a compromise between unwieldy “Pure” democracy and dictatorship, where a few or one person rules in all respects. We elect, by ballot, a virtual “dictator” for our constituency who mirrors the views of the people within the constituency and will act accordingly when sitting in government. We control this “dictator” by law and term of office. We pay this person from public funds to release s/he from economic duties in order for them to devote themselves full time to become enlightened of each issue and to vote for us on these issues. Many representatives do this from a sense of civic duty to their constituents and for their country, others do this from deep-seated beliefs regarding how a country should be run. For those who elect vigilance is a primary activity to ensure no one takes our votes for their own purposes and devices.

The story of democracy is the story of the ever widening enfranchised electorate, the citizenry, over time, from its early beginnings in Greece, where only the “citizens” privileged to have the vote, to finally in the 1920’s, where women in Europe and North America had by then achieved it. These elected representatives now come from an ever broader power base, often it has become easy to “hide” within the party and sometimes hidden agendas become far more than what the electorate anticipated. In any case democracy is a doctrine that requires persistent and constant vigilance.

In Watson and Barber's book "The Struggle for Democracy" I found a most cogent paragraph introducing chapter four, The Tyranny of the Majority:

For most people democracy means government for, by, and of the people - government by free and equal individuals. But the liberty of individuals can fall prey to the equality of individuals - for in practical terms, equality means the rule of the majority. Yet the rule of the majority can become so cruel, so wrong, so oppressive to individuals and to minorities, that it perverts democracy itself, and the rule of the people becomes the tyranny of the mob.

They continue by briefly discussing the merits of majority rule and its "basic fairness" and proceed to demonstrate the failures of majority rule, particularly if it does not pay equal attention to minority rights. There is a clash of thought in the effort to "... balance between the liberties of the individual ... and the right of the majority to legislate." The authors go on to give as examples the blacks in the United States and their search for democracy, the efforts of individuals such as, Rosa Parks, Malcom X and Martin Luther King and describe how though they may be at liberty to be part of the electoral process they are certainly far from equal in American society. India is then explored and the issues that greatly hindered independence in the late 1940's from cultural, linguistic, religious differences between Muslim, Sikh and the majority Hindu to the caste system within the Hindu faith itself, particularly the "untouchables". It is interesting to note that even though the Indian constitution banned the caste system in 1949 it still remains. The chapter then quickly moves on to the issues surrounding the Aborigines in Australia, once the majority and now the distinct minority, and their search for their rights in Australian democracy among the white majority. This was mainly achieved through watching the blacks in America and duplicating their efforts, including the famous "freedom rides", at home and using existing laws to promote their cause. Democratic issues then move on to Israel and Ireland, where in both cases the struggle is between one religious faith in a position of majority and the other the minority. Both areas have seen plenty of bloodshed where the minority seeks its rights and the majority seeks to implement its right to legislate. Watson and Barber then conclude with "Democracy can be saved from its errors only by more democracy" and "if we learn to reconcile individuals and communities that do not require the dominion of majorities over minorities, democracy will have won a very great victory."

Though the book "The Struggle for Democracy" was meant for a wide audience and is therefore necessarily sometimes overly simplistic, it does nevertheless broadly address key issues within democracy that people work with, struggle against and search for. The chosen examples are exemplary of the problems inherent within democracy and particularly with the danger of tyranny of

the majority. How is it possible to be both free and equal, when one impinges on the other? If one is free, one is then able to presumably pursue one's best advantages and that may exist within a large majority of people and these people will "always" get their way. The minority will rarely if ever get their way unless in some way they can become a majority within minorities. But this will rarely occur as the original majority will mostly stay steadfast to preserve their rights. While all this sounds like the practice of freedom of democracy within which majority rules it is seldom equal. The majority, be they of a particular race, religion, creed, sex, calls the shots and any majority would be loath to give that up. But as Watson and Barber said from the beginning, in order for a democracy to work well, more and more democracy must be thrown into the effort. The majority must create and then accept the laws of protecting the minority interest, to not do so would leave the effort ill attended to and great injustice and strife will prevail among the minority. Too much freedom and equality suffers, too much equality and freedom suffers, and therefore it is justice that exists between freedom and equality. We all want freedom and we all want equality; perhaps the arbiter should then be justice, not freedom or equality.

This issue of "The Tyranny of the Majority" is definitely residing within the place I work as a high school teacher. As I teach democracy and attend to all its issues, it becomes readily apparent that democracy exists "out there", beyond the walls of my classroom and school. It appears to be an ephemeral thing, hard to point at and harder still to grasp. But in my case the vast majority of parents and their students, all want the same thing - a relevant and useful education for their children and themselves. It is the special interests that use that broad murky common desire of busy parents, trying to make ends meet and care for their children, for their own ends and purposes, and as they do they lay claim to that "majority" opinion. Today, individual freedom, choice, effort and grade are the form of democracy in use in my school, I call it "freedom to earn" but hardly equal. For the students the equality is of opportunity - they are equal in places in classrooms, equal in degree of choices of program but they are not free to choose their program or to take them as they wish or in the institution they wish. They must have the, aptitude, character and marks to progress from one level to another and while the upper minority, the high achievers, receive some special attention through "enrichment" and the students with learning difficulties are attended to with accommodations, in the name of equality, the great majority between them are caught. It is this calculated use of the busy and non-informed majority of both parents and students toward social engineering by minority that I find so difficult to deal with - justice is not a word they use in their language of freedom and equality in democracy.

My second chapter reflection comes from the book by Trevor W. Harrison and Jerrold L. Kachur entitled “Contested Classrooms: Education, Globalization, and Democracy in Alberta. The chapter of concern is by Lee Easton, “Constructing the Perpetual Learner: Education, Technology, and the New Economy” and seemed to me a walk through the history of my career and an affirmation of my own thoughts as a teacher in Alberta for the past 20 odd years. This chapter is an expansion on Andrew Nikiforuk’s ideas and is strongly written to convince the reader of the dangerous shoals ahead for education in Alberta. Easton contends that it is not technology that is driving the new curriculum rather it is “equally from industry’s wholesale adoption of flexible production techniques such as just-in-time delivery...” He goes on to say that Nikiforuk “overlooks how this threat is directly connected to industry’s desire to play a more direct role in matters of curriculum and pedagogy.” Easton then goes on to demonstrate how the “right-wing project to rewrite social relations” then “becomes a ‘private’ good rather than a ‘public’ good” and that “once education is rewritten as a set of skills and ‘knowledges’, the market’s invisible hand, not government policy, will ostensibly better ensure that the mix of ‘skills’ training meets society’s needs.” The threat of “being left behind” comes to the forefront and the trio of “cyber-technologies, education and business agendas is intimately connected”. Easton then moves on to show that where Nikiforuk concentrated on elementary and secondary institutions, it was not limited to them and that in fact post secondary institutions are already deeply involved in the creation of this “new person”, the “perpetual learner”. And that the “perpetual learner is an individual who accepts that the economic forces of global competition require “workforce flexibility” and “uncritically accepts that work comes and goes” and that it is the responsibility of the worker to remain current at their own expense. Easton then explores the connection between “perpetual learners and habitual consumers” particularly as it pertains to technology as well as the disturbing notion that in its construction the “perpetual learner requires the erasing of what Donald Norris tellingly calls the ‘teaching franchise’ where “education policy-makers increasingly turn away from teachers to deal directly with students. He then finishes with the cautionary evidence that the whole idea of each student writing annual plans and goals is taken directly from the business plan of the corporate sector and he calls for greater efforts towards social justice by saying, “We need to remember that technology is not a product but a process: something people do, not something done to people.”

For the time it was written, around 1997, in the height of the cutbacks and debate regarding education, social engineering and the global economy, this article has no equal in laying bare the reasons behind the strategies of the collaboration of government, education, big business and raw

capitalism. If it were not for the language difference I would suggest this paper was written at just before the turn of the 20th century and possibly even fifty years before that! The name of the game is social engineering and it was being played hard in the nineties and still does to this day. Easton's analysis and synthesis of events, ideas and circumstances are telling - the topic is easy to grasp. My question is why have I only now just read it? While I experienced all the changes as a classroom teacher that he describes and that I sat in many a staff meeting coming to grips with these new ideas as to what we should be doing in the classroom and what the new student requires and should be capable of doing, I had no idea of the depth and breadth of the over all plan by government and business. We saw what the companies were doing, union busting and hiring part-time workers and calling our students in class on their cell phones telling them to come to work. We heard all the statistics that was coming out; in our father's time one career for life, in our time perhaps two, in our children's time perhaps five jobs (not careers, jobs).

My personal experience with what has happened is with this rat rush to get ahead, to improve the bottom line for shareholders, business has forsaken its social responsibilities to the community. It all flies in the face of our common view of democracy. While calling for increased individual freedom, developing curriculum to promote this, changing rules in order to better facilitate it, they are, in fact promoting anything but democracy. It is an elite, a very close knit and powerful elite, that forms policy and regulations that cleverly perpetuate them. I agree with Easton that what we really have is an institution that creates workers - technologically capable and infinitely flexible, a requirement of "just-in-time" Toyotaism. We facilitate rapid consumerism were students devour marks in class and clutch to them with both hands like they would a life-preserver, they hoard them like misers and rarely can answer what it was they learned for those marks. This is true for nearly every class as they jump from one disparate subject to another - consuming as they go. More schooling equals better opportunities. We have led students to believe that the job is everything, that earning money is everything - that if they do not do well at school they will have a poorer chance of getting the job they want, their options diminish, but if they get their job and lose it they are well prepared to handle the next one. We are reaping the rewards of the nineties and the push for the perpetual learner: a growing segment of students aware of the hypocrisy and for whom school is irrelevant and a growing number that are going against the grain of established social (read business economic) need. The students don't want to kill themselves at school, nor at work, and are beginning to seek out alternatives to the paths purposefully made available to them. If anything, we are far from free and equal and they know it.