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EDITORIAL

Canadian politicians who flirt with populism are playing with fire

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 COMMENTS

Democracy is easy to ridicule. George Bernard Shaw satirized it as "a device that ensures we shall be governed no better than we deserve."

Yes, democracy is far from perfect, at least in its execution. Politicians sometimes lie. Party leaders greedily hoard power in their offices, and demand mindless obeisance from caucus members. Money can buy access to cabinet ministers.

But subtract democracy's human failings, and it's impossible to beat.

A properly functioning constitutional democracy provides stability, and the opportunity for economic growth and individual prosperity. The churn of regular elections keeps politicians honest. Independent courts protect minorities from the tyranny of the majority, and everyone from government overreach.

Democracy truly is better than all the other forms of government that countries have tried, and keep trying. Its flaws are plain to see, but they exist in the cause of ensuring people are as free as possible to control their own destinies, while also being subject to sensible laws.

That is a far better cause than ensuring the continued rule of a single party, as in China, or a single leader, as in Russia, Hungary, Turkey and Venezuela. But it is also a cause under threat from within its own ranks, as a [recent report by the Samara Centre for Democracy](#) shows.

That threat is populist politicians.

The report by the Toronto-based organization says that, based on its biennial polling, Canadians' level of dissatisfaction with federal politics and politicians is not rising. Instead, it's falling.

About 60 per cent of those polled agreed with the statement, "I don't think the government cares much what people like me think." That's high, but well below the 75 per cent who agreed in the early 1990s.

The same goes for the statement, "Those elected to Parliament soon lose touch with the people." In 1992, 85 per cent agreed with it. This year, only 63 per cent did.

Samara also found that 75 per cent of those polled are satisfied with the way democracy works, up from 65 per cent in 2015. But even though Canadians are notably less cynical these days, some politicians are using populist language that could reverse this healthy trend.

Samara's analysis of Parliamentary transcripts found that federal politicians are more apt than ever to complain about "the elites" – the put-down used by populists to describe anyone not on their side.

This coincides with the rise of Canadian politicians who are outright populists, such as Premier Doug Ford in Ontario – who once suggested, à la Donald Trump, that a judge who delivered a ruling unfavourable to him was biased against his party – and those who dabble in the genre, such as Conservative Party Leader Andrew Scheer.

"Never have taxpayers and everyday Canadians more needed someone who will stand up to this government, the media and the privileged elite on their behalf," Mr. Scheer wrote in an op-ed in October of last year.

Canadians ought to be wary of politicians playing this game. The Samara report nicely sums up the chief dangers of populism: It fuels distrust in institutions, such as the election process and the media; it makes followers hostile to the checks and balances that constrain the powers of their preferred leader; and it divides people into camps that cannot speak to each other.

At their worst, these erosions of democracy allow populist leaders, such as President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, to silence critics, eliminate checks and balances, and remain in power long past their due date.

That's not to say anyone in Canada has the same intentions. But those who flirt with populism are playing with something that politicians in other countries are deliberately using to weaken

democracies.

That's poor company to keep. Canadian politicians are not always going to live up to the ideals demanded by constitutional democracy; the questions raised by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's actions in the SNC-Lavalin scandal are proof of that.

But it's a very different and more dangerous thing when populist rhetoric is invoked to cast doubt on Canada's institutions, divide people and, worst of all, weaken this country's greatest asset: Its flawed but priceless democracy.

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