

Is democracy in decline?

Politics is increasingly seen as a game played by insiders, where ordinary citizens have little voice. Is democracy “slipping away in front of us?”

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“Democracies as we know them are sleepwalking their way into deep trouble.”
— John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*, 2009.

There’s a kind of Clintonian simplicity behind Premier Dalton McGuinty’s decision, as he announced his leave-taking from provincial politics this week, to indefinitely shutter the Ontario legislature.

He probably did it, as the former U.S. president explained during grubbier circumstances, because he could.

Few who pay attention to public affairs, including some in McGuinty’s own cabinet, are happy about the prorogation decision. But just why the premier calculated that he could act so egregiously with relative impunity is where the discussion needs to move.

McGuinty surely did so because the institution of parliament has been so diminished, discredited and debased in recent decades — by all political parties, at all levels, in all parts of the country; by news media and by the electorate — that he figured another indignity would scarcely be noticed.

Recent history would have encouraged such a conclusion.

Parliament and provincial legislatures are too frequently the mothers of all disillusionment, the place where well-intentioned idealists grow sad and cynical.

“I had tremendous expectations for my first week as an elected Member of the Provincial Parliament,” former PC leader John Tory wrote in an opinion piece for the Star in 2005.

The sentiment could have been echoed by most anyone ever to walk awestruck into the Pink Palace’s legislative chamber and claim one of the seats therein.

In short order, it becomes obvious that real influence and authority has left the precincts — drifting inexorably over recent decades into first ministerial offices, where cabals of unelected appointees make most decisions that matter and tell elected members what to say and how to vote.

Luminaries such as economist Don Drummond have far more access to premiers, and far more sway over public affairs, than any mere MPP.

In exit interviews of federal members, conducted in 2011 by the Samara democracy research organization, MPs characterized themselves as “potted plants” and “clapping seals.”

Their greatest frustrations, they said, usually came from the arbitrary demands and punishments of their own parties. Many admitted to voting for bills or measures with which they did not agree.

They said the politics most commonly seen by the public “did little to advance anything constructive.” The most useful work by MPs was done away from the spotlight, they said, in caucus or in the less-partisan environment of committees not much covered by journalists. What is showcased, instead, is theatre, posturing, stonewalling and, too often, vicious personal attacks.

Such a portrait of political life is hardly likely to win public respect. Yet it rings familiar to anyone who has spent much time in any legislature in the country.

At Queen’s Park, one of the most compelling, if little-noticed, documents ever produced was a paper written in 2000 by former Liberal MPP Richard Patten.

“What if our democracy started slipping away in front of us and we did not even take notice?” he asked in Democracy in Ontario.

“What if it were done incrementally, by individuals who were not necessarily undemocratic, just overzealous, righteous and naïve? Could it in fact happen, not wilfully or violently, but just because we were not really paying attention.”

Patten wrote in Ontario at a particular time and place, five years into the Common Sense Revolution of former premier Mike Harris.

One of the first acts of the Harris government was the introduction of a monstrous omnibus bill that left few areas of provincial governance untouched. It also set the foundation for other arbitrary acts that some of the Ontario judiciary found worrisome.

In July 1997, an Ontario court judge accused the government of “imperiousness” and “megachutzpah,” even as he threw out a constitutional challenge against its amalgamation plan for Toronto.

That August, another judge said the arbitrary powers assumed by the government in scrapping school boards were “breathhtaking” and “repugnant to our basic legal traditions.”

About the same time, a Divisional Court judge declared a government drunk-driving measure unconstitutional and “a triumph of administrative convenience over rights enshrined in the Charter.”

In 1999, such judicial chidings notwithstanding, Mike Harris was re-elected with a second majority government.

Just as Prime Minister Stephen Harper, after his own controversial decisions to prorogue Parliament in 2008 and 2009, was rewarded with a majority government in 2011.

From such history, and the recent distaste for their legislatures shown by his provincial counterparts elsewhere in Canada, McGuinty might have fairly concluded that such niceties as accountability and scrutiny are seldom decisive factors come voting time.

There is plenty of blame to go around in the shrunken status of parliaments.

Too often, elected members putting ambition ahead of their consciences have been complicit in their own emasculation.

Too often, the news media have cheerfully debased the currency and, in the process, discredited ourselves.

From Watergate on, as media critic James Fallows has written, reflexive cynicism became the journalistic norm, a sneering implication that all politicians were crooks, dolts or bed-featherers.

Concentration of media ownership, tough economic times and new technology have combined to mean that fewer agencies cover most legislatures full time, that those doing so work with shrunken staffs, that reporters must feed more news platforms ever quicker and shorter reports on an ever more complicated world.

In such a climate, conflict and vitriol, blame or simplistic demands are easier to deal with than complex process or debate. And governments know it.

In a widely publicized speech in September, Allan Gregg said he has begun to see troubling trends at the federal level.

“It seems as though our government’s use of evidence and facts as the basis of policy is declining, and in their place, dogma, whim and political expediency are on the rise. And even more troubling . . . Canadians seem to be buying it.”

All of this has contributed to widespread disgust with the system — to the disdain in which, especially by the young, parliaments, politicians and the news media are held.

Canadians, in alarming numbers, are declining even to vote. In a survey of the disengaged, Samara heard politics described as a game played by insiders, a realm where tactics are all, where ordinary citizens have little voice.

There’s a gap, it concluded, “between what politics is and what democracy should be.”

It’s not just Canada or Ontario. A recent report by Democratic Audit in the U.K. said corporate power and unrepresentative politicians had left British democracy in “terminal decline.”

http://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2012/10/19/is_democracy_in_decline.html

That's a stark alarm.

Still, if it's not too naïve a hope, the sustained and sizeable protest at the McGuinty prorogation might mark a tipping point, a recognition that, as Richard Patten put it a dozen years ago, "keeping democracy healthy is something that never happens naturally or on its own. It must be nurtured and occasionally fought for."