

Watching the Watchdog: What Should Democracy Look Like?

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There's a troubling feeling in this Canadian [democracy](#) that we're doing it very badly.

That parliament -- the house of the people, the heart of our democracy -- is broken. That if we don't fix it, we'll soon be living in a dictatorship run by whichever political party can most successfully lie, cheat, threaten, blackmail and bribe its way to power.

In fact, there are those of considerable wisdom and a certain cynicism who insist we're already there.

The non-partisan think-tank [Samara](#) is so troubled by all this that it's devoting the month of February to a one-a-day series called *Redesigning Parliament*.

At the same time, the venerable *Globe and Mail* quotes the [Institute for Research on Public Policy](#): *"In the advanced parliamentary democracies, there is nowhere that has a heavier, tighter party discipline than the Canadian House of Commons."* That's not intended as praise.

So the G and M is assigning a whole week to [Reinventing Parliament: Why it's Broken and How to Fix It](#). Here's the newspaper's theme:

"Parliament is dysfunctional and out of date. What's needed: a reimagining of the democratic forum -- from how we debate the policies that matter most to how we legislate them."

Then it gets personal: *"Only MPs themselves can speak their mind on the floor of the House of Commons, rather than simply parroting the talking points shoved into their hand by some flunkey from the leader's office."*

When the editors of the G and M run a political series like this, you know the paper is on to something really serious.

So I respond appropriately. I research with my usual impeccably due diligence, and come up with all sorts of splendid studies on Periclean, Iroquoian, Westminster, representative, parliamentary, presidential, monarchical, constitutional etc. etc. etc. democracy.

Everyone seems to agree that democracy -- "*a form of government in which all eligible citizens have an equal say in the decisions that affect their lives*" -- is a good thing. But there's little agreement on which form of democracy is the best good thing.

Then I remember a BBC TV program I sometimes screen when training broadcast journalists. I tell them the series *Yes Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister* are two of the very finest examples of political journalism I've ever seen. They're hyperbolic, perhaps. But honest.

The series show and tell democratic politics like it actually is.

You might notice a certain cynicism.

Prime Minister Jim Hacker: We must give back power to the people. And I shall be the one to introduce this, um... What shall I call this new scheme?

Aide: Democracy?

Sir Humphrey Appleby (Senior Civil Servant): You told a lie.

P.M. Hacker: A lie?

Sir Humphrey: A lie.

P.M. Hacker: What do you mean, a lie.

Sir Humphrey: I mean you ... lied. Ah yes, I know this is a difficult concept to get across to a politician um ... you ah ... ah sorry ... ah yes, you did not tell the truth.

Sir Humphrey: Yes, but now he wants to introduce his next idea.

Sir Arnold: A minister with two ideas? I can't remember when we last had one of those.

Sir Humphrey: If you want to be really sure that the Minister doesn't accept it, you must say the decision is "courageous."

Bernard (P.M.'s Private Secretary): And that's worse than "controversial"?

Sir Humphrey: Oh, yes! "Controversial" only means "this will lose you votes."

"Courageous" means "this will lose you the election!"

P.M. Hacker: Opposition's about asking awkward questions.

Sir Humphrey: And government is about not answering them.

Permanent Secretary for Health: It would be different if the Government were a team, but in fact they're a loose confederation of warring tribes.

Hacker: Are you saying that winking at corruption is government policy?

Sir Humphrey: No, no, Minister! It could never be government policy. That is unthinkable! Only government practice.

Sir Arnold: The higher the office, the higher the level of paranoia.

Sir Humphrey: If local authorities don't send us statistics, Government figures will be a nonsense.

P.M. Hacker: Why?

Sir Humphrey: They'll be incomplete.

P.M. Hacker: Government figures are a nonsense, anyway.

Bernard: I think Sir Humphrey wants to ensure they're a complete nonsense.

Sir Humphrey: How are things at the Campaign for the Freedom of Information, by the way?

Sir Arnold: Sorry, I can't talk about that.

Sir Humphrey: Open government, Prime Minister. Freedom of information. We should always tell the press freely and frankly anything that they could easily find out some other way.

Sir Humphrey: The Official Secrets Act is not to protect secrets. It is to protect officials.

Press Officer: Politicians are dependent on us, a thousand press officers to publicize their little triumphs. The Official Secrets Acts [exists] to conceal their daily disasters.

Sir Arnold: It's a contradiction in terms, you can be open or you can have government. If people don't know what you're doing, they don't know what you're doing wrong.

Head of MI5: We can't have unfounded, arrogant press speculation. That's the last thing we want.

Hacker: Even if it's accurate?

Head of MI5: Oh, especially if it's accurate.

Sir Humphrey: Prime Minister, the Treasury doesn't work out what they need to spend and then think how to raise the money.

P.M. Hacker: What does it do?

Sir Humphrey: They pitch for as much as they think they can get away with and then think what to spend it on.

Recognize anything Canadian from the above?

THE HUFFINGTON POST

CANADA 

Former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill famously supported democracy with the faintest of faint **praise**: *"Democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried."*

Then he **dissed** voters who dare to try to practice it: *"The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter."*

As for me, I think parliamentary, participatory, representative, Canadian democracy is a truly splendid idea.

And we should certainly try it.

What do we have to lose?