

Celebrating Responsible Government at the age of 150

Harry Baglole

Next year, 2001, marks the 150th anniversary of perhaps the most significant democratic reform in Prince Edward Island history. In 1851, the Island achieved Responsible Government. By that crucial innovation, effective control of our government passed from the British-appointed Lieutenant Governor to the popularly elected House of Assembly. From then until now, an elected Premier has headed the Executive Council. We have had other important democratic advances – most particularly the expansion of the franchise to include all adult men and women – but nothing which marked such an important seachange in according political authority to the Island populace.

In my opinion, this calls for celebration. And the best way to honour the event may well be to examine closely the state of our Island democracy, to look for new innovations in the spirit of 1851. I have two suggestions....

I'll begin by reaching back a bit farther in our Island history. The story of our present democratic institutions dates to 1773, when our House of Assembly met for the first time. Only Nova Scotia's Legislature is older among Canadian provinces. For over 225 years, then, we have had Representative Government in our Island – meaning, essentially, that the people are represented directly in the governance. Some would argue, however, that this representation is flawed, particularly so in the past couple of decades.

I am referring here to the increasing tendency in Prince Edward Island elections toward lopsided majorities for the winning party. In three of the last four elections, the Opposition has been reduced to two or fewer members. I see at least two major problems with this: 1) It can hardly be said that we have a truly representative democracy, when the roughly 40% of the votes which have been cast for opposition parties yield only about 5% of the seats. 2) The role of a strong Opposition is essential in a vital democracy – not just for the constructive challenge presented to proposed Government action, but for the knowledge and experience gained by a "government in waiting."

To remedy this inequity – which is also an inefficiency – I suggest that we consider very seriously the adoption of a version (crafted to particular Island needs) of the electoral system known as proportional representation (PR). Over the past decade, an increasing number of Islanders have been recommending this, in letters to the editor, motions passed at meetings, and briefs to legislative committees. For example, seven of the 15 presentations to this year's Special Legislative Committee on the Election Act have sounded this theme.

Very briefly, PR means that the number of seats held by a political party in the Legislature would be proportional to the number of votes received; therefore, a party receiving 40% of the votes would be accorded 40% of the seats. A move to pure PR would likely be too radical a change for PEI. But we could emulate jurisdictions like New Zealand and Scotland and adopt a mixed system: part single-member ridings, like our present method; and part PR. If we were to adopt a system with, say, 20 single-member ridings and 10 elected by PR based on the popular vote for

the whole province, we would be guaranteed an Opposition of at least four members, based on the present popular vote (that is, 40% of the 10 PR members). I think this would be a distinct improvement on the situation we face now, with the tendency toward elimination of the Opposition.

The second democratic innovation would be a dramatic reform of local government in Prince Edward Island.

For many years now, going back four decades to the Comprehensive Development Plan and the community development work of the Rural Development Council, then continuing through the administrations of various Premiers from Angus MacLean through to Pat Binns, there has been much political rhetoric about the importance of community in Island life. The community has been exalted as the touchstone of Island values, the repository of what is good and noble about this place. At the same time, there has been much vagueness, even confusion, about what is meant by this term "community": does it refer to a geographic area, or simply a community of interest? And if the former, is it a distinct unit of local governance, with definite boundaries and by-laws, or simply a placename along the highway, punctuated by shiny new road signs a mile or two apart?

During this same period, we have also witnessed a continuing centralization of authority by the provincial government. There have been various efforts at "de-centralization"; but this has usually been in the form of setting up various ABCs (that is, Agencies, Boards and Commissions), ostensibly at arm's length, but all under the ultimate control of the central government. This system of governance does more to extend the control of Charlottetown into the countryside than vice versa.

I would argue that what we require now is a systematic review of local governance in PEI. As a general rule, the powers given to ABCs should be transferred to democratic community authority, that is, to local governments. To be effective, these local authorities would need to be larger than at present, and with an independent tax base. The size of territory I have in mind could be as large as West Prince, covering the area from Portage to North Cape. The Evangeline district would be another logical municipal unit, united by language and culture. There would be at least one more such unit west of Summerside, perhaps with Tyne Valley as the hub.

For this to work, it would be essential for all of Prince Edward Island to be included in one of these local government units: at present, most of our rural areas are outside incorporated districts. Moreover, any such reform must be carried out in a thoroughly democratic way, with no forced amalgamation. The objective is for communities, by voluntary combination, to attain sufficient heft and authority to stand up for local interests.

These, then, are two recommendations for strengthening democracy in our province. The first would assure that our Island Legislature included an Opposition strong enough to enable the House to do its job – to be more than a mere rubber stamp for the Executive branch. The second would give real and substantial authority to people in their local areas. With a mandate from the local electorate, they could then proceed to put community development into practice.

Is it likely that one or both of these reforms will come about during the term of the present government? The prospects are not promising. There is no strong pressure for either, whether from communities themselves, or the Federation of Municipalities, or the Official Opposition in the Legislature.

Still, it would be nice to think that our present generation of Islanders might initiate basic democratic reforms worthy of celebration 50, or 100, or even 150 years from now.

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