

**First Salvo:**

# Sham Democracy

## The right to live in dignity as free citizens is being threatened

**Henry Beissel**

It is a privilege to be invited by the editor of *Humanist Perspectives* to launch *Counterattack*, which is to become a permanent feature of this magazine.

As Humanists we are committed to a world where reason and compassion prevail, both in the conduct of our private lives and in the governance of public affairs, so that all people, irrespective of age, gender, race or religion, can live their lives with dignity as free and socially responsible, equal citizens. That commitment is now under attack from all sides.

Since space does not permit us to counter-attack on a broad front all at once, let us, for starters, fire the first salvo at our sham democracy. We invite you to respond vigorously or to pen your own counterattacks, and we shall see where it takes us.

Under attack are the very foundations of civil society. For us, in the Euro-American world, these were most clearly articulated in the American Declaration of Independence's *all men are born equal* (1776), in the French Revolution's rallying call for *liberté, égalité, fraternité* (1789), and President Lincoln's pledge of a *government of the people, by the people, for the people* (1863).

This is not to suggest that the Age of Enlightenment either invented human rights or initiated the political struggle for their embodiment in the social contract. They have their origins in the dawn of history and their roots in the human heart. That story need not concern us here because it has been explored in enough learned books to fill huge libraries.

Nor am I concerned with definitions of *freedom, equality, and brotherhood*. Something can be gained from philological inquiries, but all too often they are academic exercises in sophistry designed to evade the moral imperative implicit in the precepts. I use the terms in the common sense in which they are understood by all sane women and men: they take *freedom* to mean the right to engage in any action or speech that is meaningful and enjoyable to them without inflicting harm on others or infringing on the enjoyment of the same rights by others; they take *equality* to mean the right to be treated equally in the nation's courts, the right to equal opportunity in the educational systems and the employment markets as well as the right to share fairly the fruits of their labours according to their contribution to the nation's wealth; and to them *brotherhood* means the obligation to treat others with kindness, consideration and compassion.

I intend to show, step by step, now and in sequels of *Counterattack*, that all of these values are under attack.

Let's start with government *of, by, and for the people* which is generally accepted as a definition of democracy. If *of the people* is to mean that parliaments are to be elected from members of the public who meet the basic citizenship requirements and that any of them may be elected, then our government is democratic – theoretically!

In fact, of course, this is not how it works, at least not at the federal or provincial levels. To begin with, it takes money to run for office – money to deposit to be allowed to run and money to finance your campaign. The more money you can spend on self-promotion through flyers, door-to-door hustling, and in the media, the bigger your chances of getting elected. A homeless person has no more chance to be elected to parliament than a rabbit has to climb a tree.

But money isn't enough. Unless you run as an Independent (in which case you are unlikely to be elected because you're up against the well-financed election machinery of the major parties), you must also be chosen as a candidate by one of the parties. The party's choice will be based on an assessment of your ability to deliver the riding and your proven loyalty to the party. Among other things, loyalty involves submitting to the judgment and will of the party, regardless of whatever different views you may have on any social or political issue. Down the line, in parliament, this may come to mean voting against your better judgement.

Half a century ago, in a grocery store in Toronto, I remember my astonishment at discovering, for the first time, in one corner a small section over which hung a sign that said HEALTH FOOD. It stopped me dead in my tracks as I looked around and pondered the implications of this claim for the rest, indeed the majority, of the foodstuffs that filled the shelves. Similarly, a few decades ago, I was taken aback to hear a Prime Minister allowing MPs in his party a "free vote" on an issue so that they could vote according to their conscience. What, I asked myself, do they do the rest of the time?

A spot of research quickly revealed the answer: *hew the party line!* Each party even appoints a Whip to make sure no one steps out of line.

Is the common good really best served by a system of government whose MPs are chosen by a political party on the basis of their money, attractiveness to the public (a dubious quality at the best of times) and their – let's be kind – flexible conscience? Is it compatible with democracy that decisions in parliament are dictated by the party leader?

The question leads us directly to the second demand of democratic government, namely that it be *by the people* – that is to say that the will of the majority shall prevail so long as it does not infringe on the rights and liberties of the minority. Ideally, governance should be by consensus, but given the growing size of our communities at all levels, consensus would paralyze any representative assembly. Still, it is incumbent on democratic government to try and come as close to consensus as possible, and that means minority government is always more democratic because it can function only by compromises that involve a larger section of the electorate.

There are two reasons why majority government does not reflect the majority public will. The first has already been mentioned: the dictatorship by the party boss exercised upon the parliamentary vote of his MPs replaces the variety of views represented by the different members with his singular decision, and thus silences dissent, the very life-blood of democracy.

The second reason is at least as important: the first-past-the-post electoral system disen-

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franchises a substantial proportion of the electorate and rarely leads to a government that actually represents the majority of the population. I cannot remember the last time a majority government in Ottawa was elected by a majority of Canadians.

The current Conservative government came to power in the 2011 election with slightly less than 40% of votes cast. Since only just over 61% of Canadians bothered to vote – a measure of their trust in our political process! – it means that about 25 % of eligible Canadians voted for Stephen Harper. Yet this gave him 166 seats and therefore an absolute majority in the House – a *comfortable majority*, as political commentators noted. Our Prime Minister runs the affairs of the country comfortably with the support of a quarter of the population. So much for the will of the majority in Ottawa today!

When we ask ourselves how such travesty of democracy came into being and why it continues to operate virtually unchallenged, it soon becomes evident that money is at the root of the trouble. The prime object of the major political parties is to come to power. To come to power requires money, lots of money, because it means engaging in a long and intense campaign involving a constant barrage of extremely expensive publicity in the media. The most affluent contributors to the party coffers to make that possible are the big corporations. They are in business to maximize profits, and to achieve that they need legislation favourable to them, like tax exemptions and tax shelters, both for the companies and for their owners to grow richer and richer. But more than that, they need to direct major national policies to serve the so-called ‘free market’, the neocon religion.

In recent years, a growing number of mergers has increased the power of these corporations to the point where national governments are no longer a match for them. Besides, the same corporate elite also controls the major public media and through them manipulates public opinion directly, indirectly and subliminally, by spreading lies and disinformation, and suppressing truth. The wealth of these corporations and their owners has reached astronomical proportions,

and they have all but wrested absolute control of the political process from the general public. Even the politicians they sponsor are little more than straw figures as important political decisions concerning important matters such as war, energy resources and privatization, are not made in national parliaments any more but in the boardrooms of international corporations by individuals who are accountable to no one but themselves.

In view of these developments, it is not surprising that the third requirement of democracy, namely that it be *government for the people*, has come to mean *government for the rich so that they shall become richer still*. It is against this hijacking of the body politic for the purpose of extorting fairytale riches that the Occupy-Wall Street movement has arisen, made possible by a medium the rich and powerful are not able to control: the Internet. In the summer issue of *Humanist Perspectives*, we shall take a closer look at the popular counterattack as it spreads across the globe and challenges that growing proliferation of unfettered greed.

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