

I'm voting for the least offensive candidate to try and avoid the most offensive government. I wish.

by kevin harding - Thursday, April 07, 2011

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All right everyone, we've got an election. Let's get our democracy on?

Maybe, just maybe, I'll roll out of bed on May 2 (though I'll likely sleep in), trudge over to the local school or church basement, wait in line behind everyone, argue with the poll clerk that I actually live where I claim to live (Ontario doesn't issue identification cards with addresses that aren't drivers' licenses, so I'll have to try to prove my identity with a credit card bill, passport, and a smile), I'll be handed a little piece of paper with names on it and directed to a folded piece of cardboard with a tiny pencil behind it and I'll have the chance to vote.

In all likelihood, while I'll have a limited number of choices as to who I can gift with my little pencil-scratched 'x', I'll likely end up voting for the least offensive candidate in order to try and avoid the most offensive government. [It's the Canadian way!](#)

I suppose my biggest difference here, as compared to my colleague [Jasmin](#), is that I'll likely be arsed enough to get out of bed and trudge over to the 'democracy'-fulfillment station. That being said, I agree with the vast majority of what he writes when he says that the election is "[a spectacle provided for the masses, a circus.](#)"

So... if I agree with the vast majority of what he writes, why would I be arsed enough to get up on May 2 and actually vote? Who knows. Maybe I'm hopelessly optimistic. Maybe I'm deluded. But I'll probably be voting.

I just won't be overly happy with what I'm doing. But I'll still likely be doing it.

Why? Because I really don't want Stephen Harper to get a majority government, because I'm genuinely concerned about the havoc he could wreak with an unchecked hold on power. Because a Harper majority government could crack down on our already circumscribed 'freedoms' and 'rights' even more than they already have. And because this would severely challenge everyone's ability to organize and create a better world.

Sure, Harper is a boogeyman (full of boogers, I might add) and Ignatieff is the leader of the party that did most of what Harper is currently doing, but they did it with a red tinge instead of the blues. Layton, who looks like Lenin but certainly doesn't act like him, can promise the world (but not socialism) because he certainly won't be prime minister, and Gilles Duceppe (maintenant et toujours mon politicien préféré!) can act as both a comic relief and actually cutting critique of the whole charade at the same time.

But this doesn't change the fact that the election will have very real outcomes that impact each and every

one of us, whether we like the system or not. Admittedly, these outcomes will happen no matter who is in charge, but with any luck, they may not be *as bad* with Harper out of power and someone else - by default, Ignatieff, I suppose - in. Though I'm relatively confident that's just wishful thinking. But I'm reluctant to simply *not vote* even though I know the system is broken and won't get better any time soon.

So why is Jasmin not voting? [He says](#):

There are three very simple reasons why I will not be voting, and they are as follows:

1. Our electoral system is broken, as such, my vote is meaningless.
2. The parties running are inept and/or disingenuous.
3. Continued electoral turnout on the part of voters is making matters worse, rather than better.

Right, right, and mostly right. So why vote? Because, in the system that we're currently cursed with, that is, representative parliamentary democracy, the election is effectively the only time that we officially get to participate in democracy in the formal Canadian system. And while the system is broken, mostly because the parties *are* inept *and* disingenuous, it's what we're stuck with for now.

For now.

We can be - *and we should be* - working towards a better system. Towards a better democracy. Quite obviously, as we saw in British Columbia during the single-transferable-vote referendum, and in Ontario during their referendum on electoral reform, the system that we currently have is structured in such a way as to prevent this kind of change. The parties themselves oppose voting reform that would try to fix the worst problems of the electoral system. The parties themselves are broken, reduced from articulating demands and engaging people in governance to cultivating and grouping together acolytes who thoughtlessly repeat party lines and foam at the mouth at the sight of someone wearing another team's colours. And while I'll tentatively agree that turning out to vote does legitimize the system that we're cursed with, I worry that if all of us who actually care about progressive ideas stayed home and didn't vote that we'd get the worst possible outcome. But sure, like the Marxists say, maybe we just need to progress through even more bitter times before we get to that whole revolution bit...

Okay. We're not going to be getting a better system through simple voting and electoral and parliamentary charades. But we're *absolutely* not going to be getting there if we ignore the only fleeting moments of democracy that most of the people around us know, whether or not they like, approve of, or participate in them.

Most people reading this website will acknowledge that elections aren't the only instances of actually existing democracy and politics in the world. A lot of people here are actively involved in their unions, in community groups, in student associations, in trying to make the world a better place. All of that is politics. All of that is democracy. of the opinion that democracy *ought to be* how we collectively discuss and decide how we'll live together and work towards the future.

But this isn't how everyone else sees these things. A lot of people out there see politics as starting on March 25th and stopping on May 2nd. Democracy is the process of scratching that little 'x' next to the least offensive candidate. This is their lived experience. And I question how much we're contributing to

the betterment of things when we dismiss this.

How many times have we gone to a protest rally and had handfuls of people on the sidewalks wonder why we're doing what we're doing? Wondering why we don't join a party and change things from the inside? Sure, it's pointless to actually do that - but maybe we can seize the opportunity of a general election as momentum towards building the communities of change that we want to see. People may not be more engaged in politics at the moment, but they're at least aware that something is happening.

Might not we make Jamsin's three-pointed argument about protest politics in Canadian democracy? They very rarely make any changes for the better, though they certainly try their most. Often, under state-sponsored and often precipitated conditions of 'violence' they legitimate state repression. They're often insular. And continued efforts to block a street and smash a window sometimes - though certainly not always - seem to alienate more and more of the population from people who protest for very good and very important reasons.

I'll take Jasmin's point about needing to build communities of change. That is what we need to be doing. We cannot and should not be focusing on reactionary politics. We need to be creating the world that we wish to see. But how do we do this? Just as I think that politics is something that encompasses all aspects of collectively self-determining how we live together and go forward, I think that activism can encompass the full range of what we might think is political - from elections to anything.

Voting and actually effective political organizing and activism are not exclusive activities. We can do both. And perhaps we should. I can understand the logic behind boycotting elections because they're relatively pointless, they mere change the colour of the people who rule us, and so on - but I don't think that it's hypocritical of me to desire substantive and progressive change in the political realities of where I live and to vote.

So, on May 2nd, I'll trudge over to the church basement, credit card bill and passport in hand, smile on face, and I'll go behind that little bit of folded cardboard and I'll take that little pencil and I'll scratch and 'x' on the ballot paper.

I'll vote for the least offensive candidate in my riding, in the hopes of avoiding the most offensive government.

And I'll continue working with my friends, my colleagues, and my comrades in activism, towards social change, towards political progress.

Because voting will only take 15 minutes of my day. And even though I live in a 'safe' riding, there are people out there who don't. And if enough of us scratch that little 'x', then maybe we won't have to spend months getting back to where we are now in terms of 'rights' and so forth. Or spend months defending the next right that Harper wants to take away from us - even though Iggy may well do the same thing. Regardless, fifteen minutes to vote isn't much, and if it gives me more time to work for change, maybe it's better. And if you're particularly inclined, you can always spoil or reject your ballot, using the system to make a statement.

And then we can all go out and keep building communities for change. Sure, we've all got a raging

election on. But it's not our only political moment, nor is it a monolithic instance of democracy. And it's not mutually exclusive with other forms of activism.

Another, better, fairer, more just world is needed. And we need to work for it, with it, with each other, in as many ways as we can.