

Building Community as a Tonic for Political Cynicism

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Thursday, July 22, 2010

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More than just political burnout, there is a malaise of cynicism present in many progressives across Canada right now.

Instead of just being tired from fighting many battles with social and economic conservatism, more and more progressives I'm encountering have become disillusioned with those who ought to be our champions.

There are number of head-scratching events in progressive politics in recent years that tend to sap our energy. In response, we can either cocoon or rebuild. Rebuilding community is the far better choice.

FOOD FOR CYNICISM

Without even describing the litany of right-wing causes of our malaise, here are some left-wing let-downs:

- 1) Obama is not Jesus and didn't/couldn't deliver on really good healthcare. So, we continue to fight harder to protect our system from American privateers while American progressives figure out how much their new president can actually accomplish.
- 2) The B.C. NDP failed to stop the mean, right-wing Liberal party from winning a third straight election largely because it alienated its base by rejecting its own party policy supporting carbon taxes. In reaching for centrists, the B.C. NDP lost much of its progressive base, who stopped funding, volunteering for, and even voting for, the NDP. Welcome to a third term of abuse after an election with the lowest voter turnout ever.
- 3) On the Saskatchewan NDP's website the party leader declares these priorities: "strong business, strong labour, strong government." Putting business first is disconcerting. Putting government last is no salve.
- 4) Proportional representation movements across Canada fail to resonate with the masses, in part from corporate media attacks and concerted neglect from mainstream progressive parties.
- 5) Split electorates in this decade lead to near ties in U.S. presidential elections, and stalemate minority governments in Canada and spurts of stillborn coalitions. But, within days of a minority government election in Britain, two parties form a functioning coalition, with hope for electoral reform. We should not be standing by while politicians form a coalition and pursue electoral reform in the UK when we could mobilize for the same goals. Yet, we do.

POLITICAL ABUSE SYNDROME

American psychologist Bruce Levine wrote on AlterNet.org last December about the abuse syndrome that progressives seem to embody. Beaten down by the soft fascism of the corporate-government partnership, interpersonal alienation, consumerism and suburbanization, Canadians, too, seem unable to rise above our humiliation to exercise our democracy and vote out our economic and social abusers.

In his book, *Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in Challenging Times*, Paul Rogat Loeb warns against allowing our defeats to push us into a private life, ignoring the public sphere in despair. We cannot subcontract our democratic activism to professional political operatives. Democracy is a muscle that can atrophy. Obama's healthcare plan is weak, in part, because the millions who mobilized to elect him stopped mobilizing after he was elected, not realizing that the same kind of effort was required for the next four years in order to force Congress to actually implement change.

THE COMMUNITY TONIC

So how do we lift ourselves out of our abuse syndrome? We can take our cue from the hive minds around us: monarch butterflies, bees, ants, starlings – those awesome birds that fly inches from each other in tight formation. If we human beings were able to cooperate to even a fraction of how the hive species cooperate, think what we could accomplish. Yet, our abuse syndrome keeps us from believing that the power of cooperation can defeat the isolation of the consumer individual. It's so easy to forget the complexity of the social systems we have already created. We built them incrementally, with occasional grand leaps forward (Medicare, CPP). They have been steadily dismantled incrementally as well. And we cower as a people instead of linking arms to regain what we've lost.

Beyond recalling the power of human collectivity, we can remember the recent rebirth of the salon movement to fight social decay. We need to re-purpose that positive social movement to embrace those of us who suffer from disillusionment in progressive leaders and institutions. We need to begin by looking to one another.

Instead of retreating to our living rooms, we must invite people into our living rooms to work through the angst of missed expectations. Then we need to throw our hopes and principles into a crucible so we can focus on what matters most. We can't retreat to the private life; we must be uplifted by the relationships in our private lives! Truly, why belong to a revolution that doesn't include dancing? When the cynicism beats us down, we need to gather our people together, enrich our souls and our communities, go dancing and build each other up, because, though we might presume so, we are not alone.

We need to build more teddy bear catapults. We need to visit ArtThreat.net regularly to support and take part in artists' efforts to engage in all things political. We need to write clever, insightful, clear 25-word letters to the editor. We need to follow [the Yes Men](http://theYesMen.com). Community is the tonic for cynicism and shutting down, that's for sure. It's what's keeping me going.

We really are all in this together – unless we embrace some kind of despairing, free-agent status. And when that happens, we have really lost. It is by restoring each other's community spirit that we can win.

The above is a version of my commentary piece in the current issue of [Our Times](http://OurTimes.ca), Canada's independent labour magazine. It was written before the G20 suspension of Canada's constitution in Toronto.