

## Fixing Canada's Democracy, Part 74 of 877

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Thursday, June 14, 2012

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I spent 3 hours in the House of Commons from midnight to 3am this morning watching the contemptuous debauchery of the Conservative government squash democracy in ramming through Bill C-38. Several weeks ago I also spent some time in the BC legislature watching that version of embarrassing contempt.

Beyond a proportional representation system that would head off the Conservative Party's contempt for democracy, I have noticed a few improvements that can immediately improve how our democracy functions. Some minor changes can greatly improve democratic efficacy in Canada, but the governments in power have every motivation to avoid making them. The Bill C-38 debacle that will play out for the next few hours should motivate us to hold our elected leaders to a higher standard.

Here are 3 ways to improve democracy immediately:

- 1. The BC legislature's speaker should let the media in the BC legislature use electricity, computers and smart phones in the press gallery.** This is allowed in Ottawa. Journalists have the capacity to report on antics in the House to a more extensive degree than any of the rest of us can see on CPAC. In BC, journalists cannot use electricity for their work while sitting in the press gallery so they end up listening to the legislature audio feed in the press room. This keeps them from seeing all that is happening on the floor, including much of the shameful behaviour of our honourable MLAs. Since time is not plentiful for journalists, sitting in the press gallery to catch all that is simply not practical. But much happens in there that doesn't make it onto the audio and not seeing it impedes holding politicians accountable for their shameful, contemptuous behaviour. This would help us catch up to the superior coverage that we see in Ottawa.
- 2. Politicians need to respect the institution of parliament as much as the public is required to.** The general public are held to a much higher standard of decorum while in legislatures than the politicians themselves. This is absurd. We saw this blatantly last spring when Jack Layton unilaterally ceased NDP heckling, which demonstrated one way of elevating the tone of parliament. Decorum improved overall and the heckling Conservative government looked like drunken frat boys. However, while politicians are sitting in the House tweeting, Facebooking, watching West Wing episodes, doing Sudoku, designing quilts on their laptops, madly typing with index fingers, reading *The Best Laid Plans* and *It Seemed Like a Good Idea* [an ironic commentary on bill C-38], the public is not allowed to have pens, paper, laptops or smart phones. We are not allowed to express to the world what we see below us from the gallery. And at 2am this morning when Kady O'Malley went off shift from the press gallery and left, most of the Conservative Party shouted out their goodbyes and comments on her leaving. That was polite and everything, but it shows how casually they take their responsibilities when the public in the gallery is to be silent. Let's seek a compromise. Let the public have smart phones, pens, paper, laptops and wifi to express their views of our honourable leaders. And let's insist the MPs show

some more maturity and respect for the institution they embody by empowering the speaker to maintain decorum. And I won't even get into how MPs can lie in the House, but to call an MP a liar is not allowed.

- 3. The speaker of the House of Commons and provincial legislatures should compel ministers to actually answer questions in question period.** What we have now is an elaborate dance of contempt as the government dodges and spins uncomfortable questions. The Ottawa journalists are continually waxing on about the speaker envy they possess as the UK's speaker does just that. But that isn't the Canadian convention. It's also anti-democratic and reduces the public's engagement with politics, which generally benefits the incumbents.

See? That wasn't so hard. These simple procedural changes would give us all a chance to evaluate the quality of our leadership. But governments that enjoy contemptuous behaviour have no motivation to hold themselves to a higher standard, so we will need to demand it of them.