

INTERVIEW (from page 4)

for the majority of citizens. Our current government only represents about 35% of voters. The PQ in Quebec has approximately 10% of Canadian voters but 16% of seats in parliament. The GPC also has approximately 10% of polls but no seats in parliament.

The House of Commons is only elected proportionally on a national basis but not on a constituency basis. Here it's first-past-the-post/winner-take-all like the US. Senate reform (i.e. being elected) is on the national agenda including in the GPC.

SB: Does this make for a better or worse decision-making process than a two party system, in your view?

EJH: When there is a majority government in power, Canada's multi-partisan system offers little or nothing in improved decision-making because the majority party (almost always based on a plurality but not majority of votes) can do as it wishes. The only thing a multi-party system offers in that situation is more choices for a voter or NGO to contact if they feel ignored by the government. In a minority government situation, much the same holds true, but there is some possibility of the opposition uniting to pressure the government to modify its program, or even bring it down (triggering a new election) in some cases.

SB: Your Senate is appointed, rather than elected, like ours, but it is also traditionally subordinate and follows the wishes of the House of Commons, which is elected on a proportional basis. Could you talk about the implications for democracy of a system that favors representational democracy over state, or in Canada's case, provincial, representation?

EJH: Our House of Commons is not elected proportionally, although it (theoretically) features representation-by-population, whereby each seat represents roughly the same number of voters. However, even this system isn't very closely followed, meaning that some of the urban electoral districts have as many as five times the population of some rural ones. This is a combination of constitutional issues and political reluctance to risk seats in rectifying it.

Our Senate has fewer powers than the American, in that it can only review and either pass legislation, reject it, or send it back with recommended changes. All legislation originates in the House; the Senate cannot introduce new bills. The Senate can commission studies on important issues but their findings and recommendations, while often very balanced or progressive, have no force of law and generally are shelved if they don't suit the agenda of the ruling party.

Traditionally the Senate at least examined and debated House-passed bills before rejecting them, but recently the minority Prime Minister has managed to create a majority for his party in the Senate (through appointment of cronies) and they have used this to reject a House bill without discussion.

SB: I understand your Senators can be dismissed from their post if they fail to show up for two consecutive parliamentary sessions or if they turn 75. Does this improve

the quality of your Senators?

EJH: The age limit seems reasonable, if arbitrary, and I don't know that it makes a lot of difference. A session represents a season, and attending it does not mean attending every sitting, so the attendance rule is not very strict and has only rarely (if ever?) been enforced.

SB: Erich, you are on the Shadow Cabinet - Ecological Fiscal Reform. Could you describe what that is specifically, and also what a Shadow Cabinet is?

EJH: In the Canadian parliamentary system, derived from the British system, the Cabinet is formed of Members of Parliament (MPs) who are each elected to the House to represent a local constituency, then chosen by the Prime Minister to manage a portfolio (ministry). The leader of the Cabinet, and effectively the leader of the government, is the Prime Minister who is likewise elected in a single district, but chosen by his party to lead. This is quite different from the US where the President is directly elected nationwide while his Cabinet are appointed by his choice only and usually not drawn from currently serving representatives.

After an election, the party with the most seats is asked to lead and form a governing cabinet. The second-largest party is labeled the "Loyal Opposition" and sits across the legislature from the government members. This opposition party then appoints, from their own ranks, a "critic" for each ministry whose job it is to monitor (shadow) that ministry & minister and to critique their actions. Together, these representatives are termed the "shadow cabinet" and form a sub-set of that party's elected caucus, also known as the "front bench" (because of occupying the front seats in the legislature). (Those MPs who are not in cabinet or shadow cabinet are termed "backbenchers".) In a traditional two-party system, one would have a single Cabinet and a single Shadow Cabinet, but Canada has had a three-, four- or five-party tradition for several decades now, and each opposition party has their own shadow cabinet who critique the ministries from their own particular ideological stance. Thus the Green Party has a shadow cabinet, a group of 20-40 candidates who are each assigned to a ministry or portfolio and are responsible for maintaining a degree of familiarity with issues in that sphere and issuing periodic press releases on related topics. In the elected parties shadow cabinet members are elected MPs, but the Green Party does not yet have elected MPs, so our Shadow Cabinet is instead drawn from (generally) our strongest candidates in terms of vote performance. (Specifically, 41 of our 305 candidates exceeded 10% of the local vote in the last election, and the majority of our SC are made up of these "ten-percenters".)

SB: John & Erich, you both support the Green Tax Reform, an idea with roots in the economic philosophy of 19th century political economist Henry George. Could you describe the basics of this reform proposal and also the specific Green tax resolution passed in June of this year?

JF: It was me that introduced the Georgist philosophy (raised its profile) (continued on page 14)