

Sunday October 14, 2012

The essential quality for democracy

By Jim Taylor

The re-election of Hugo Chavez as president of Venezuela a week ago makes me wonder about definitions of democracy.

My sampling of news reports in the mainstream media suggests that few Americans would hear Venezuela described as a democracy. Dan Rather, for example, called Chavez a “dictator.” Others used comparable terms.

Even Britain’s normally left-friendly *Guardian* headlined the election, “A Strongman's Last Stand.”

Chavez’ open hostility to the U.S. has led many – especially among the oil companies Chavez nationalized – to treat his regime as illegitimate. They expected that his political rival, Henrique Capriles, would defeat Chavez and restore Venezuela to its divinely destined role as a satellite of Exxon-Mobil.

It didn’t work out that way. Voter turnout exceeded 80 per cent – a figure that puts both the U.S. and Canada to shame. Chavez won 55 per cent of the vote, a clear majority.

Compare that to Canada, where Stephen Harper’s Conservatives have governed for six years, although roughly 60 per cent of Canadians voted against him in three successive elections.

The demonizing of Chavez also ignores Venezuela’s measurable demographics. Since Chavez won the presidency in 1998, especially since he took over the oil industry in 2004, poverty has been reduced by half. Living standards have improved. College enrollment has doubled. Many students get free tuition. Housing and health care are more widely available.

Per capita GDP – a standard measure of prosperity – has grown 2.5 per cent annually.

By contrast, the *Guardian*’s Mark Weisbrot noted, “The two decades that preceded Chávez amount to one of the worst economic failures in Latin America, with real income per person actually falling by 14 per cent...”

Weisbrot concluded, “In Washington, democracy has a simple definition: does a government do what the state department wants it to do?”

Fraudulent elections

This was not a rigged election. Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter stated, “Of the 92 elections that we’ve monitored, I would say that the election process in Venezuela is the best in the world.”

By combining electronic and paper trails, the Venezuelan system eliminated both Florida’s “hanging chads” and Nigeria’s stuffed ballot boxes.

Venezuela had a further benefit -- people knew what they were voting for. Chavez will continue to nationalize foreign-controlled corporations, possibly starting with the communications industry.

By contrast, Stephen Harper did not campaign on gutting federal agencies like Statistics Canada or national parks. In B.C., Gordon Campbell directly denied planning to sell B.C. Rail and to impose a Harmonized Sales Tax – and then did both.

Which kind of election, I wonder, deserves an epithet like “fraudulent”?

How dictators gain power

Increasing, I am coming to a conviction that democracy is not just about how one gets elected. It’s also about how one gets un-elected.

A study of dictatorial regimes – a subject on which I’ve done more research this week than I enjoyed -- indicates that there are essentially three ways to gain power.

The first, obviously, is military force. Examples abound: Idi Amin in Uganda, Qaddafi in Libya, Franco in Spain, Hafez al Assad, father of current leader Bashar al Assad in Syria...

The second is to get appointed to a position in which one can consolidate power. The primary example is Stalin, in Russia. But also Kim Il Sung in North Korea. It’s often stated that Hitler was elected; in fact, having twice failed to win a majority of electoral seats, he finagled a deal to get appointed Chancellor.

The third option is to get elected.

Bashar al Assad won two elections – rigged or not – as president of Syria. Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, Papa Doc Duvalier in Haiti, and Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, all attained power through legal elections.

Exit strategies

But not one of these dictators was willing to get voted out.

That, it seems to me, is the necessary quality for a democracy. Not whether it supports free markets or combats communism. Not the social programs it develops or the taxes it imposes. Not even whether it uses first-past-the-post voting, preferential ballots, or run-off elections...

It is democratic if its leaders can be deposed without violence. The will of the people not only places someone in power, it can remove him. Or her.

By that definition, Canada and the U.S. qualify as democracies, no matter how autocratic some leaders may become.

India, which has repeatedly replaced its dynasties, qualifies. Pakistan is questionable; although the same age as India, all but 20 years have been ruled by generals.

The democracy practiced in, say, Kenya or Peru may not meet all western ideals. But these nations have demonstrated that a government can be dumped.

Hugo Chavez displays the egomania, the personality cult, of many dictators. The test will come if and when he eventually faces electoral defeat.

If he steps down voluntarily, he will confirm Venezuela’s status as a democracy. If he doesn’t, he will prove his U.S. critics right after all.

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YOUR TURN

You offered quite a range of responses to last week’s column about plagiarism.

Some of you endorsed the idea that all of us plagiarize. Steve Lawson wrote that he agreed with me, if only because “I’ve probably already plagiarized you or someone in the past.”

Steve added, perhaps slightly tongue in cheek, “I’m saving all your Edges columns in a special file to use when I retire and don’t want to think anymore.”

Don Miller also admitted to borrowing: “When I was a pastor, I didn’t hesitate to take someone’s thought or outline and expand on it. There are too many other significant things that we need to be doing [rather than requiring] original thinking.”

Fran Ota expanded on preaching styles: “The old style of sermon (the way my father was taught to preach) was to credit every theologian or author -- and the more theologians you could credit the more erudite you were. Styles of preaching changed, and so did that bit. I use material from other sermons all the time, but either rewrite and incorporate, or name the writer, and attach complete credits at the end of the sermon. I often draw from sermon sites which give permission for use -- but if I'm using someone else's stuff, it needs to be credited -- not IN the sermon, but at the end; most particularly since those sermons go up on a blog site.”

However, the tenor of most responses was that I had been far too charitable to Margaret Wenté and the *Globe and Mail*.

Byron Wilson wrote, “I am in complete agreement that all of us ‘borrow’ from other sources, even if only to synthesize new ideas. The real issue is what one brings to the discussion that is new (even if only opening a new angle of view) or to move it forward.

“However, what Ms. Wenté did goes far beyond your rather kindly summary – and her behaviour is all the more outrageous in light of her recent column criticizing educators and opining that students who plagiarize should get a zero.

In the single case you cite, Wenté wasn’t interviewing – there was no frantic scribbling – but she has on several occasions used other peoples interviews as if she had conducted the interview. Numerous sources have documented her long-running practice of recycling others’ ideas and work, often word for word.

“After initially circling the wagons and shooting at the messenger, her own editors belatedly acknowledged how far outside the chalk lines she had gone, and her discipline seems to have included a suspension of her column. Since the *Globe’s* public undressing, examples of Wenté's word for word copying are starting to pile up on the net (at my last count there were more than ten inarguable and substantive examples within four years).

“Attribution needn’t be voluminous, but when recycling a substantive point a simple ‘As (insert name) observed’ acknowledges that one is not the progenitor of the words or thought. The humility enforced by that act is a critical counter-balance to the ego of anyone in a position to wield such influence. That humility is what Ms. Wenté has been shown to lack, not only in her columns, but in her inability to acknowledge her mistakes now.”

Andrea Murphy agreed with Byron: “I'm very disappointed in your Sharp Edges piece about plagiarism. Why defend Wenté? Carol Wainio laid it out for us to see how Wenté had taken whole sentences from Gardner's article. (And this was just one instance, by the way.) I was happy to see the CBC had the guts to fire Wenté from its Q-media panel.”

Norm Seli also noted that this was not the first time Wenté has been charged with plagiarizing: “I would be more supportive of her position were it the only time this has been raised, and certainly more likely to accept her viewpoint had it not been preceded by attacks on Carol Wainio. It appears to me that it was only once the *Globe and Mail* and Margaret Wenté discovered that bullying and belittling Carol Wainio didn't work, that an apology was offered, an explanation proffered.”

In a subsequent e-mail, Norm expended on his theme: “As I followed the event, it was the *Globe’s* response that bothered me initially.... To claim that Ms. Wainio was an obsessed anonymous blogger was a blatant lie; she was known to both the *Globe* and Margaret Wenté. The dismissive manner in which they tried to deal with the accusation bothered me... The initial attempts to sweep in it aside, and then to discredit the accuser, hurts their credibility in my eyes; subsequent changes at the *Globe* and *Mail* might also lead one to think that the accusation had merit.”

Isabel Gibson suggested that there were applications beyond mere journalism: Plagiarism “raises the interesting question of how well we credit others' ideas in our (unwritten) lives. In my latter work years, I've found it a win/win/win thing to go out of my way to credit what I think was the source of a suggestion (at work, for example). It makes me feel generous, simultaneously credits and elicits support from the idea generator, and models a corporate culture that notices and gives credit where 'tis due. Generosity in this sense at least seems to be particularly amenable to a 'pay it forward' mentality -- given credit, we tend to pass it along.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I have started including a psalm paraphrase for the coming Sunday with my Soft Edges column, on Wednesdays. Why not on Sundays, you ask? Well, partly because psalms seem to me to fit better with the general mood of Soft Edges, which is more likely to deal directly with faith-related matters than these Sharp Edges columns. And partly because Soft Edges is about 250 words shorter than Sharp Edges, and so including the paraphrase on Wednesday won't make the e-mailing quite as long.

That does mean that if you want to receive the paraphrase, and are not on the Soft Edges mailing list, you'll need to subscribe. No charge, just send me a message, jimt@quixotic.ca. Or you can subscribe automatically by sending a blank e-mail to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca.

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at jimt@quixotic.ca.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
