

Sunday November 25, 2012

Did you want anchovies with your election?

By Jim Taylor

There's these five guys, see. They're short on cash, so they pool their resources to buy a pizza. They can only afford one topping.

Two of the guys love anchovies. The other three hate anchovies, but can't agree on pepperoni, ham, or mushrooms.

Guess what – everyone gets anchovies.

That, in a pizza shell, is our electoral system. It goes by various names – winner take all, first past the post, plurality... Whoever has the most votes wins the election.

Which sounds as though it makes sense. Unless you're allergic to anchovies.

Federal by-elections

Three federal by-elections happen tomorrow – in Victoria, in Calgary, and in Durham, Ontario. Media attention seems to have focused on the Calgary by-election, mainly because of Justin Trudeau's swipe at Stephen Harper, two years ago.

But consider the possibilities. Victoria has six candidates – all men -- representing the Conservative, Liberal, New Democratic, Green, Libertarian, and Christian Heritage parties. It's theoretically possible (although unlikely) that all six could win approximately the same number of votes. If so, a candidate with just 17 per cent of votes cast could represent all 110,000 constituents of the Victoria riding.

In fact, if voter turnout is low, the winner might go to Ottawa with fewer than one in ten constituents actually supporting him.

Like it or not, though, all 110,000 get the same anchovies.

The winner-take-all system works reasonably well when voters have only two choices -- and when the process is not complicated by arcane institutions such as the U.S. Electoral College. Automatically, the person with the most votes has a majority.

It doesn't work as well when voters have more than two options. To cite just one example, in 1970 the Ontario government amalgamated the cities of Fort William and Port Arthur, at the head of navigation on Canada's side of Lake Superior. The twin cities had long been known, collectively, as "the lakehead."

A referendum offered three names: Lakehead, The Lakehead, and Thunder Bay. Although 60 per cent preferred one of the two "Lakehead" variants, they split their vote. "Thunder Bay" won, although endorsed by barely 40 per cent of voters.

When voters face multiple choices, it's almost certain that the majority will be stuck with anchovies they didn't vote for.

Minority power

Relatively few votes can have remarkable effects. Eduard Hiebert, who's much better at this kind of thing than I am, analysed the results of the last provincial election in Quebec.

Pauline Marois's separatist Parti Quebecois came out of that election with a minority government. Hiebert found that just one tenth of one per cent of Quebec voters -- 4,144 votes, suitably distributed in nine ridings where the PQ came second -- would have given Marois a clear majority.

Even more startling, had Quebec Liberals managed to get out 21,371 additional federalist voters – about half of one per cent of the electorate -- in 13 ridings, premier Jean Charest would have won a third majority instead of a humiliating third place finish!

In only three ridings, Hiebert notes, did candidates achieve a majority of the electorate. Another 24 candidates won a majority of votes, if not of constituents. The remaining 98 benefited from the anchovy option -- all eased into office with merely minority support.

Absolute majorities

That's why countries like France hold run-off elections for president. If no candidate gains a clear majority on the first ballot, the two leading candidates go into a second round of voting.

Preferential ballots integrate the run-off principle within a single election. Voters mark their first, second, and third choices. On the first round, only first choices are counted. If any candidate wins a clear majority, second and third choices are ignored. But if there is no clear majority, then the lowest contender's second choices get counted and distributed among the remaining candidates. And so on, until a majority winner emerges.

It's equivalent to a run-off, without needing a second – or third, or fourth – vote.

Some political analysts argue that winner-takes-all voting promotes a two-party system by penalizing smaller parties, making it harder for them to gain representation. Others claim it encourages voters to do their own run-off before they ever enter the ballot box, eliminating candidates less likely to win.

Either way, the system militates against dark horses and innovative approaches.

Interestingly, no Canadian political party uses the first-past-the-post system to choose its own leaders. Not one. Not federally, not provincially. If no candidate wins a majority on the first ballot, the parties dump the lowest candidate and vote again. And again. Until someone actually gathers enough votes for an absolute majority.

If the winner-takes-all system is good enough for us, why isn't it good enough for the parties that ask us to vote for their candidates?

Conversely, if political parties consider absolute majorities essential for their own elections, I wonder why they don't consider that system suitable for the rest of us. Or do our elected representatives not trust us to count as high as three?

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YOUR TURN

Last week's column – about views on justice, etc. – generated a blizzard of e-mail. Here's part of it – I've left out half a dozen additional letters.

The letters fall loosely into two groups: those who comments on Canada's justice system, and those who commented on notions of heaven/hell.

First, the justice system generally.

Cliff Boldt admitted that he was “getting tired of people decrying the abuses of the Harper government, cases like Ashley Smith.

“It is easy to identify issues, but hard to do something about it. The Harper government's chances of re-election have been improving, according to the latest polls. He is pleasing some people out there. Ashley Smith just doesn't count. Just like Robert Dziekanski didn't count for many of us.

“Unless and until people who are truly fed up with the likes of Vic Toews start to talk in their church, exercise club, coffee klatch, and start to organize people at the grassroots level to defeat Conservative MPs and candidates, nothing will change. Harper and his crew only understand votes - nothing else matters to them.

“So, work to show him the votes.”

Freda Stewart in Calgary called the Ashley Smith saga “a mind-sickening story from start to finish. I wonder if those who devalued this girl's life and gave the order she be allowed to commit suicide live easy with themselves these days.

“My larger questions are

1. Where were the people in her early years who should have been seeing to what should have been obvious as a form of mental illness. Parents, teachers, doctors etc.? Who dropped the ball? Pulling fire alarms and tossing apples at people sounds like pretty normal kid behavior. Why did this behavior continue?
2. And when did the administrators and staff of correctional facilities become [so insensitive as] to stand by and watch a child die? Their own common decency should have demanded they have the courage to flout the order from on high and intervene! Justice system? Only in the minds of those who receive their pay cheques via same.

“Ashley, be at peace now. Whatever torments you lived with are over.

Fran Ota, currently in Cornerbrook, Newfoundland, remembered growing up in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, home to a federal penitentiary: “The director and his family were members of our church as well as friends; he was one of the foremost of his time trying to reform the prison and correctional system in Canada. It seems as if we have gone backwards.

“It struck me, too, where the word ‘penitentiary’ comes from, yet we do not allow for, nor encourage, repentance or penitence. It has become about power and control, not rehabilitation or restoration of the person.”

Charles Hill in Texas supported Fran’s view: “It appears to be an over-simplification to blame a suicide, or indifference to suffering, on theological principles. I do agree with your assessment of historical using of eternal reward or punishment to control the behavior of others.

“I see indifference or stupidity as the issue. The primary question is, how did someone with a history of suicide attempts have access to anything with which they could harm themselves?

Charles added, “The legal system of the US is focused on punishment, not rehabilitation -- but not on neglect while incarcerated.”

On the theology of heaven and hell, Diane Zorn objected: “The Christian theology of Heaven and Hell is not one that rewards people with Heaven for doing good deeds; in fact it teaches that **no one** can get into heaven by works. The Bible teaches that **God does not wish to see anyone perish** in Hell, and would like everyone to avoid it. (II Peter 3:9) That is why Jesus sought out the people on the fringes of society, the poor and the outcast, to show them there was a better life ahead for them. It also teaches that, yes, Hell does exist -- but those who go there *choose* to do so by rejecting God, usually because of pride or self-righteousness.

“Christians do good works because they want to *reflect the character of God*, not to win a way to heaven, and part of that character is expressed in *loving the lost and down-trodden* like Ashley Smith. So to say that the church has been ‘making heaven and hell a way for the privileged few to maintain control over the miserable many’ is not, in truth, what it stands for.”

I agree that it is not what the theology stands for, but I still maintain that it has been used for that purpose.

Jack Driedger had this comment: “As is so often the case, the concept or the truth is not necessarily at fault. How it is applied by the person or organization is the problem.”

Jim McKean agreed that heaven and hell had been used as carrot and stick: “...The Church's use of the idea so those in power can control others. Much to some people's chagrin, many of my colleagues have been preaching that there is no hell...”

Jim thought that a discussion of religious dogma having negative effects might have also noted “the death in childbirth of the East Indian woman in Ireland.... Hopefully Irish society will get it right before another woman dies in childbirth.”

Ted Wilson mused, "Last night I re-watched a documentary on Jim Jones and Jonestown. His perceptions of right & wrong, heaven & hell, are so similar to those of Vic Toews they are scary -- probably more so than Toews would like to admit."

Steve Roney argued that I had not included some extenuating circumstances: "According to Wikipedia, Smith had previously attacked guards with concealed weapons when they rushed to her aid.

"But it makes no sense to blame Vic Toews, and less than no sense to blame Christian theology. You are hanging the incident on him only because he supposedly said Smith was not a victim. This seems to be a quotation taken out of context.

"And then, to blame it on the Christian belief in heaven and hell --! If you do not believe in a 'literal' heaven and hell, I take it your understanding is that the terms are metaphors. Which is to say, in common speech, you do not believe in heaven or hell. But if you do not believe in heaven or hell, what is your concept of the afterlife? Do you believe that the soul dies with the body? It seems to me it matters what your alternative idea is.

"It should [also] be pointed out that Toews was raised a Mennonite. The Mennonites are pacifists. Not big on revenge, then. Seems to me that kills right there your idea that a belief in heaven and hell leads to vengefulness."

Darryl Forrest in Penticton did not endorse Steve's sympathy for "Toews and his ignorant, distorted and cruel handling of the so called 'public safety' portfolio. I have found it hard to believe that someone who practiced as a public prosecutor would have developed an attitude [of] pandering to frightened old white folks who vote Regressive-Con.

"How is it that two men, both born of missionary parents, could have such conflicting values? You being a moderate progressive liberal and him being, for lack of a better description, an asshole."

James Russell moved the question from theology to psychology: "The problem is not the belief in a literal 'heaven and hell'. What makes people indifferent to others' suffering -- indeed, to want to create that suffering -- is power, combined with a lack of accountability. Given faceless bureaucracy, any old excuse to punish will do, and 'authority' can induce almost anyone to hurt or even kill someone else. The excuses are not limited to heaven or hell, nazi ideology, or the good of the communist party. A simple instruction from a 'white coat' will get most people to apply what they think are harmful and even potentially lethal electrical jolts to strangers, given that 'the experiment requires it'. There is a whole literature in psychology devoted to the phenomenon."

HYMNSIGHT

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It's called HYMNSIGHT, and it's for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to: <http://www.hymnsight.ca>

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for using projected visuals in church.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look at this service. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it? Blessings,

Ralph Milton

TECHNICAL STUFF

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

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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...

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For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, www.seemslikegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsraps@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.
