CANADIANA: ON DEMOCRACY AND THE CORPORATE ELITE

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Category: Opinions

Witnessing a Democracy's decline
James Travers, The Toronto Star , Apr 21, 2009 04:30 AM

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So many other conspicuous failures make the list that there's a hum in this capital about Canada's declining democracy. Honourable members returning from two more weeks away are finding the place awash in three new books and newspaper commentary deconstructing how power slipped from citizens, backbench MPs and cabinet ministers into the hands of appointed professionals clustered around the Prime Minister.

It's too early to tell if this is Canada's modest facsimile of Czechoslovakia's 1968 Prague Spring, the blooming of democratic revival crushed under invading Soviet boots and tanks. It's not too soon to conclude that citizens here are rightly worried that accountability, rules and even laws are now routinely sacrificed to expediency.

On April 4, this paper published an essay, now found at thestar.com/travers, arguing that legitimate as well as illegitimate forces were breaking the bonds binding politicians, particularly successive prime ministers, to the people. The response was overwhelming. Canadians, cognitively or intuitively, had sussed out that something is wrong here and, unlike the optimistic 19 per cent EKOS Research surveyed, don't think it's getting better.

Former governor general Adrienne Clarkson agrees. She writes in a foreword to Parliamentary

Democracy in Crisis, a thoughtful collection of mostly academic articles focusing on the pre-Christmas coalition crisis: "There is so much misunderstanding about our system and of the functioning of every part of it that we are in serious danger of losing the good things that we have and of not understanding when bad things happen."

Green Leader Elizabeth May and former MP Garth Turner detail those threats in new books. Then they offer elixirs. May, an outsider wanting in, argues for the correctives of proportional representation and coalition government. Turner, once an insider and now on the outs, sees salvation in the empowering blogosphere.

Of course, there's no silver bullet, no quick fix. A system progressively dismantled over decades by Liberal and Conservative prime ministers isn't repaired overnight. Restoring Parliament as a public watchdog, making ministers more than a focus group and convincing civil servants to again speak truth to power all require a protracted test of wills.

Control is as convenient to leaders and their nodding cliques as it is intoxicating. It won't be surrendered without a struggle.

Still, there's hope beyond the coincidence of current concern. Ballot-box rewards wait for the leader or party able to convince Canadians that democratic reform is a commitment, not just another campaign promise to be scrapped once power has been secured.

Proof of that political potential is in the 40 per cent EKOS found who believe that democracy's in failing health. Proof is found, too, in those who still bother to vote in the expectation they are electing a functioning government complete with democratic safeguards, not a four-year autocrat.

Corporate Elite Settles an Old Score
Linda McQuaig, The Toronto Star , 21 April 2009

By any logic, advocates of unfettered capitalism should be seeking cover from public wrath these days, as the deregulated capitalism they foisted on us continues to self-destruct, bringing calamity into the lives of millions.

Yet I've heard barely a whisper of mea culpa from members of this corporate crowd.

On the contrary, they seem to see the economic meltdown as an opportunity to finally do in their old foes in the labour movement.

After years of demonizing unions and undermining workers' rights, they're now taking advantage of the unpopularity of the auto bail-outs to try to take away gains that the Canadian Auto Workers spent decades achieving, and that set a standard for the labour movement.

In demanding wage concessions of up to $19 an hour, auto company executives and the Harper government are hoping to deflect public anger for the economic meltdown onto those who assemble cars. (If only GM workers hadn't frittered away their time on the assembly line bundling

together those Credit Derivative Swaps.)

In reality, it isn't the auto workers, but the economic meltdown, that has plunged auto industries all over the world into a slump. Since these industries are crucial to national economies, they're being bailed out everywhere. But, as the CAW notes, only in North America are the bailouts accompanied by demands for wage concessions – even though German and Japanese auto workers earn more than their North American counterparts.

Meanwhile, debate about how to fix the slump is confined within the same old rigid doctrines. Public ownership remains taboo.

Sam Gindin, a former CAW economist who teaches at York University, argues that public ownership may be the answer in the case of the hundreds of auto supply plants that have been shut down in Ontario (and hundreds more facing imminent closure). Gindin insists Canada can't afford to lose this productive capacity, and proposes that closed plants be expropriated and turned over to a new public corporation.

These plants could become part of an ambitious government-directed project to convert us to a green economy – building the components for expanded public transit systems, redesigned machinery, appliances, electricity grids.

Such ambitious conversions have happened before. Gindin points out that from 1942 to 1944, GM auto plants were overhauled to enable GM to become the world's largest producer of naval aircraft. After the war, they were quickly converted back to auto production.

But now, faced with the worst economic crisis since the Depression, we're led to believe the solution lies not in bold initiatives but in rolling back the gains of the labour movement.

The rest of us shouldn't be acquiescent as the auto workers are vilified for their aspirations to be well paid and secure in retirement. Isn't that what we all want?

The United Auto Workers (U.S. parent of the CAW) helped create the North American middle class. They led the way in the postwar years, winning innovations like annual cost-of-living increases, as they spearheaded the development of a strong union movement that ushered in the broadly shared prosperity of those decades.

The auto workers also provided funding for important social movements of women, students, environmentalists. They even put out a pamphlet back in 1949 arguing for smaller cars, citing the need for fuel efficiency.

No wonder the business elite has long had it out for them – and now want us to believe the only viable economic model is the one that has recently brought the world economy to its knees.