

Democracy? Who needs it?

by BRIAN LOCKHART

I think many people in our society take the fact that we have a democratically elected government for granted.

In fact, so many people are complacent about it, in the last provincial election 42 per cent of you didn't even bother to get out and vote.

How many of those 42 per cent go onto complain about the government later? Well, if those who didn't make the ten-minute effort it takes to cast a ballot had actually marked an X, you could have changed the course of the election, and then you would, of course, be happy at every decision the government makes.

I used to work with a guy who had never voted once in his life. He was a middle-aged man with two kids, was born in this country and pays taxes, and yet had never visited the polls to vote in a municipal, provincial, or federal election.

When I asked him why he had never voted, he said "I dunno." In this case, I believe it was a case of ignorance or trepidation because he simply did not know enough about the process to make a real decision.

The other excuse I've heard is, "There's no one worth voting for."

That is a nonsense answer. Of course there are people worth voting for. People who are selected to run for office aren't picked up from the street corner while waiting for a bus and asked if they would like to be a politician.

It takes a lot of courage to run for public office and the people who are vetted and represent a political party usually have the background needed to be successful in what they do. Their decisions may not always be popular, and if they aren't working out, you've got the chance to show your displeasure at the next election.

We didn't arrive at a democracy and the right to cast a vote by setting up the province, and indeed the country by setting out some rules and electing the leaders.

Early in the 19th century, Ontario had no elected officials. The Family Compact ran the show, meaning a group of rich guys called the shots and filled government positions through patronage appointments.

If you were a typical citizen of the time, this meant you had no real say in who was running the government or what decisions would be made regarding the country, as it were at the time.

After years of frustration of having no responsible government, the populations in both Lower and Upper Canada decided it was time to call for an armed response to enforce change.

While Lower Canada had much more rebel support, and resulted in a much more violent uprising, the movement in Upper Canada was more subdued.

In December of 1837, a rag-tag army of rebels set out to overthrow the government. As they marched toward Toronto, they started picking up more members along the way until they numbered around 900.

When they finally reached Montgomery's Tavern in Toronto, they were met with a trained force of loyalist militia.

The rebels were untrained, and mostly farmers. Some carried rifles, others carried a pitchfork or some other kind of farm implement.

They were not prepared to overthrow by force.

When the loyalist militia fired their first volley, the front row of rebels all hit the ground to avoid being shot. The men behind them were horrified thinking they had all been killed, and did what any untrained group of rebels would do ? they all ran away.

A large number of the rebels were later captured and imprisoned and quite a few ended up hanging the end of a rope for treason.

It wasn't much of a battle, but the effort was there and the point had been made, and those in power had little recourse but to re-think how things were run in the province.

This eventually led to the creation of the British North America Act in 1867 which created the contemporary Canadian federation and its government.

I tend to agree with the statement "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others," attributed to Winston Churchill.

In many countries, the government is still run like a Family Compact, and they create and enforce laws based on a whim, not debate and legislation.

No, democracy is not perfect, but unlike a lot of people on this planet, we have a say in who governs the nation.