

Bob Rae asks the question and Daniel Bell answers it

Our Westminster model with its mixed Constitution combining elements of democracy, appointment, and a hereditary monarchy is theoretically much better suited to withstand the onslaught of democratic absolutism.



GARY LEVY

In his recent book, *What's Happened to Politics?*, former Liberal leader Bob Rae asks a good question. Not surprisingly he lays blame for our political malaise on the Harper government, citing ideological-based policy-making, regressive environmental and First Nations policy, permanent election campaigns and a tendency to play fast and loose with the conventions of responsible government. His solution is the tried and true refrain of opposition—throw out the bad guys (them) and elect the good guys (us).

This logic will appeal to those in the ABC Camp (Anyone but Conservatives), but as an intellectual argument about the state of Canadian politics, it is less satisfactory, particularly since the United States and other electoral democracies face similar or greater problems without the help of Harper. That is why we should also be reading the recent book by Daniel Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*.

A native Montrealer, Bell has been teaching Confucian philosophy at Tsinghua University in Beijing for more than a decade. He is the author or editor of numerous books and he writes widely on Chinese politics and philosophy for the media

including *The New York Times*, *The Globe and Mail* and appears on the BBC, CNN as well as other networks.

Bell argues that China is developing a genuinely new approach to governance, rooted in its long history and at odds with the Western concept that electoral democracy is the only legitimate form of government. Together with a group of other American and international scholars in California, where he is presently on sabbatical at Stanford, Bell suggests that Western democracies could learn from certain Confucian principles. For example, wise and experienced leaders should govern those political communities. Is the process of election by universal suffrage the only or the best way to attain this goal?

In fact, Bell flatly rejects Churchill's famous maxim that "democracy is the worse form of government except for all the others." He is troubled that electoral democracy goes unquestioned in the West and is even considered a universal right to be exported and implemented elsewhere. Perhaps our problems are much greater than simply tossing out one side and putting in another.

To make his point about the shortcomings of electoral democracy, Bell exposes four tyrannies endemic to the system we hold so dear. The tyranny of the majority occurs when rulers are chosen by people unable, or unwilling to understand the issues and make decisions in the public interest. The result is complete irrationality with most people voting for politicians promising lower taxes and more services. Theoretically, a majority of 51 per cent could also vote to permanently deprive the other 49 per cent of health care or other benefits and that would be perfectly legitimate in a system of electoral democracy. How can such a theory be the best of all possible systems?

The tyranny of the minority refers to the influence of money on elections. The U.S. system is more correctly described as one-dollar-one-vote, but most other electoral democracies have the same problem. This is exacerbated by increasing income inequality in the developed democracies so that more and more influence is exercised by fewer and fewer people.

The tyranny of the voting community means that the elected legislators answer only to the voters, a diminishing number in most states. What about the interests of future generations? Who looks after their interests?

The tyranny of competitive individualists refers to the harm done to the body politic by nasty election campaigns and negative advertising. This is particularly significant when elections are contested by parties, as opposed to non-partisan or consensus-based electoral systems found in municipalities and in some of our northern territories.

Having made a case against electoral democracy, Bell suggests the alternative—a meritocratic system modelled in part on the Singapore experience, which has been adopted with modifications by China.

In a meritocracy, the political process is not intended to give everyone an equal say. It is designed to identify those with above-average ability and to prepare them to serve their fellow citizens. This involves training and examination, language skills, overseas education, and long experience before individuals are entitled to take part in the governing process.

Some limitations on individual liberty may be part of the deal, but these have to be weighed against the benefits of effective leadership. One major criticism of authoritarian or non-democratic regimes, the issue of succession, has been addressed by China with the advent of term limits.

Bell is not a flag-waving proponent of the status quo in China. It can and should improve its governance system. It needs exams that more effectively test for politically-relevant intellectual abilities, more attention to ensuring that leaders have the social skills required for effective policy-making, more systematic use of a peer review to promote political officials, and freer access to information for its citizens. But electoral democracy would not accomplish any of this and is more likely to produce the tyrannies described above. In his view, China is well-advised to continue refining its system and to stay away from Western-style multi-party electoral democracy.

Western democracies will never adopt the Chinese model, but Bell suggests we may be able to improve our system by introducing mechanisms to counter-balance the deficiencies of electoral democracy. He and colleagues at the Berggruen Institute on Governance have suggested American politics would be much healthier if it relied more on mechanisms like indirect election, appointment and even random selection as used by Citizen Assemblies to bring different perspectives to the political arena.



In his recent book, *What's Happened to Politics*, Bob Rae asks a good question. Daniel Bell answers it, writes Gary Levy. *The Hill Times* photograph by Jake Wright

Our Westminster model with its mixed Constitution combining elements of democracy, appointment, and a hereditary monarchy is theoretically much better suited to withstand the onslaught of democratic absolutism. But we are so influenced by our American neighbours that all leaders in the current election seem to agree that legitimacy comes only from having the most seats on election night. This reflects an overzealous belief in populism, traceable in large part to the influence of Preston Manning and the Reform Party, and it is the real explanation as to what has happened to our politics.

For it follows from this philosophy that leaders having obtained legitimacy from the electoral process feel unconstrained by opposition or by Parliament. They can make policy by fiat, marginalize the non-elected elements of our constitutional structure, disparage the courts and make up their own rules as they go along. That is the legacy of our addiction to popular sovereignty and electoral democracy. It is the insightful message of a Canadian scholar from China and one that even Bob Rae, one of the best political minds of our time, does not come close to articulating.

Residents of the National Capital Region will have an opportunity to reflect upon our approach to politics and also to learn more about what is going on in the Chinese political universe when Daniel Bell gives two lectures in Ottawa on Oct. 2. The first is at Carleton University (Pater-son Building) at 3 p.m.; the other at 7:30 p.m. at the Sandy Hill Community Centre.

Anyone who really wants to understand *What's Happened to Politics* should plan to be there.

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