

Paper prepared for: 20th IPSA World Congress, Fukuoka, 10-13 July 2006
Session 271: State of Democracy 1
Main Theme 01
Convenor: Marian Sawer

The Canadian Democratic Audit

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The Canadian Democratic Audit

Introduction

Much was written in the 1990s and early years of the 21st century concerning a 'democratic deficit' and 'democratic malaise' in Canada. There was substantial evidence that many Canadians were dissatisfied with the state of their democratic practices and institutions. The Canadian party system was in the midst of significant upheaval, voter turnout rates had reached record low and public confidence in democratic institutions was in significant decline. At the same time, new phenomena such as increased pressures of globalization and changing communications technologies were posing new challenges to Canadian democracy. To consider these issues, the Centre for Canadian Studies at Mount Allison University in Sackville New Brunswick launched a major research project entitled *The Canadian Democratic Audit*. Under the auspices of this project, a team of prominent political scientists from across the country conducted the 21st century's first, wide-ranging examination of democracy in Canada.

Democratic Discontent

The final decade of the last century began with forceful representations of Canadians' dissatisfaction with their political processes and institutions at the hearings of the *Citizens' Forum on Canada's Future*. The following passage from the Forum's final report summarizes the sentiments many Canadians' expressed:

One of the strongest messages the forum received from participants was that they have lost their faith in both the political process and their political leaders. They do not feel that their governments, especially at the federal level, reflect the will of the people, and they do not feel that citizens have the means at the moment to correct this.¹

These findings were echoed in the 1991 report of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing which found that "many Canadians are critical of their existing political institutions. Many are concerned that these institutions are not sufficiently responsive to their views and interests."² Public opinion survey data confirmed that at the outset of the new century large numbers of Canadians continued to believe their politicians and political institutions were out of touch and unresponsive, and were increasingly dissatisfied with the performance of parliament and political parties.³ Consistent with these attitudes, voter participation in federal election campaigns had dropped substantially in recent elections, reaching a record low in 2000. And, as evidenced in Quebec City by the protests of the tens of thousands of Canadians who took to the streets, many continue to believe that public decision making is secretive, dominated by a small group of elites and unresponsive to the citizenry.

The last decade of the 20th century also saw voters turn away from a pattern of electoral competition that had dominated federal politics for more than a century. In the 1993 election the governing Progressive Conservatives were reduced to just two seats in the House of Commons as two new parties, the Bloc Québécois and Reform, enjoyed remarkable successes. Many have suggested that the 1993 election result represented more than a repudiation of the governing Progressive Conservative party. It was in part a product of widespread voter dissatisfaction with the state of Canadian democracy.⁴ At the outset of the 21st century the party system remained in a state of uncertainty, with the result being that there was no credible alternative to the governing Liberals.

These findings notwithstanding, any fair observer had to conclude that not all was lost in Canadian democracy. Canada continued to be the envy of much of the rest of the world. A relatively wealthy and peaceful society, Canadians hold regular elections in which millions cast ballots. These elections result in the selection of a government with no question about its legitimate right to govern. Canada routinely ranks at or very near the top of the United Nations Human Development Index, and tens of thousands from around the world apply each year to move to and live in Canada. Developing democracies from around the globe routinely look to Canada for guidance in the establishment of new democratic practices and institutions.

Given all of this, we believed the time was right for an expansive examination of the state of Canadian democracy and to consider where it is working well, where it is falling short, what the possibilities for reform are, and how it can be improved. Hence the idea of a democratic audit.⁵

The Audit Methodology and Scope of the Project

The term audit is, of course, most often associated with the accounting and financial worlds. The accountant uses established and accepted measures to ascertain adherence with standard financial principles. A democratic audit is more than this. In defining our purposes, we began with the notion of an organizational audit which the *Encyclopedia of Banking and Finance* defines as: “a systematic review of an organization’s activities for assessing performance, identifying opportunities and developing recommendations for improvement.”⁶ We added to this what the Oxford English Dictionary calls an older meaning of listening and hearing. Together these two definitions provided a working definition of the term audit for the *Canadian Democratic Audit* project. Thus, our purposes were to examine the way Canadian democracy functions, to listen to what others have to say about the operation of Canadian democracy, to assess its strengths and weaknesses, to consider where there are opportunities for advancement, and to evaluate potential reforms.

A democratic audit requires the setting of benchmarks for evaluation of the practices and institutions considered. This necessarily entails substantial consideration of the meaning of democracy. Democracy is obviously a contested term and we were not interested here in striking a definitive definition. Nor were we interested in a theoretical model applicable to all parts of the world. Rather we were interested in democratic benchmarks that are relevant to Canada at the outset of the 21st Century. In selecting these we were guided by the issues raised in the current literature on Canadian democratic practice and by the concerns about Canadian democracy commonly raised by opinion leaders and found in public opinion data. Ultimately, we settled on three benchmarks: public participation, inclusiveness, and responsiveness. We believe that any contemporary definition of Canadian democracy must include public institutions and decision making practices that are defined by public participation, that this participation must be inclusive of all Canadians, and that government outcomes must be responsive to the views of Canadians. This is obviously not an exhaustive list of democratic benchmarks. There are other important considerations. Nonetheless, for purposes of this project we concentrated on these three which we believe are particularly relevant to the current discourse about the state of democracy in Canada.⁷

While settling on these guiding principles, we chose not to impose a strict set of democratic criteria on all of the evaluations that together constitute the audit. Rather, our approach allowed each ‘auditor’ wide latitude in his/her evaluation. While each auditor was given the task of keeping the benchmarks of public participation, inclusiveness and responsiveness, central to their examination, each was free to add additional criteria that he or she thought particularly important to the area of democracy they examined. In this sense we differ from a financial audit and from other projects where the audit organizers have drawn up a checklist of a dozen or so democratic qualities that are assessed in each part of the audit. We rejected this approach for several

reasons. First, it requires that the number of individuals making the final assessments remain very small to ensure uniformity in the application of the standards. Second, the findings of the audit would be largely dependent on the list of criteria established at the outset, which is problematic because the selection of the democratic criteria is not an objective task. Rather it is a highly subjective exercise and thus it is likely that different organizers would compile different lists. Essentially, we rejected this approach because we did not want the normative views of the organizing committee to determine the outcome.

Ultimately, we decided on an approach that takes us somewhat away from the traditional notion of what an audit is. We used a rather large team of auditors – more than a dozen. Each of whom examined and assessed a discrete area of Canadian democracy. While all of the team members agreed to use the three established benchmarks, each was free to include other democratic criteria believed to be important to his or her investigation. The auditors were also asked to consider other values, such as the Canadian tradition of brokerage and accommodative politics that might support restrictions on contemporary notions of popular democracy.

Essentially, we asked our auditors to consider how the area of democracy they were examining measures up to the democratic norms and expectations extant in Canada at the start of the new century. While this does mean that there is not absolute uniformity in the measurements used throughout the audit we believe this adds to the value of the project. Democracy is an inherently normative concept and imposing a single, limited set of criteria throughout the audit and having a small group make the assessments would not capture the depth and breadth of the debate surrounding democratic practices nor would it capture the robustness made possible by engaging more than a dozen of the country's best political scientists in the project.

While providing each auditor with substantial freedom it is important to note that the auditors did work as part of a team. The entire team gathered at several points during the project allowing us to collectively consider the issues that defined and shaped the audit. This approach allowed us to benefit from the group's collective wisdom (something too infrequently done in academe) and to ensure coherency throughout the project. These sessions, though difficult to organize and expensive because of the geographic distance of the team members, were absolutely essential to the project's success. They often took on the air of weekend long, high level graduate seminars that both stimulated participants and enriched the project.

In assembling our team of auditors, we sought out leading scholars in each of the areas to be examined. We purposely sought out scholars with different ideological perspectives, from different generations, from all geographic regions of the country, from both genders and who use different methodological approaches. The one constant was that all of the team members were well published and highly regarded scholars. We were delighted that not a single person declined the invitation to participate.⁸

To each of the working sessions, we invited a few academics not directly involved in the Audit to critique our plans and add their suggestions. We found this a very useful way of bringing new ideas to the project and forcing us to justify and occasionally reconsider our plans as the project progressed. In addition, we held two large public conferences, both in the Centre Block of Parliament in Ottawa. These televised conferences were successful in bringing word of the project to parliamentarians, the national press and the broader policy community.

A crucial question in constructing the *Canadian Democratic Audit* was deciding upon the subjects to tackle. We decided at the outset to cover substantial ground in a short period of time. From start to finish this was a five-year project – a relatively short period compared with the much longer audits in other jurisdictions. We also decided that each subject should be dealt with in some length and so opted for book-length manuscripts on each of the subject areas being examined. These considerations necessarily narrowed the scope of the audit and required some hard choices concerning what to include and what to leave out. In making this decision we were

guided by the agreed upon democratic benchmarks. Public participation, inclusiveness and responsiveness seem particularly appropriate measures for study of public institutions and electoral practices. In considering the arguments raised by many of those who have been most critical of Canadian democracy over the course of the last decade and considering the findings of public opinion pollsters, we were convinced that a good deal of the concerns regarding Canadian democracy relate to the processes of public decision making: who makes the decisions? what opportunities do average Canadians have to influence these decisions? who sets the public agenda? Accordingly, the audit focuses on public institutions, electoral practices and new phenomena that will potentially have significant affect on public decision making in Canada.

The *Canadian Democratic Audit* includes examinations of several key decision making bodies: legislatures, the courts, and cabinets and governments. While the focus is at the federal level, we acknowledge that many Canadians primarily deal with provincial and local governments and wherever appropriate attention is paid to these levels. The structures of our governing and electoral systems are also important to the nature of our democracy and so the Audit includes studies devoted to federalism and to our electoral system. The ways in which citizens participate in electoral politics and policy making is a key component of the project and thus we include studies of interest groups, social movements and political parties. The desire and capacity of Canadians for meaningful participation in public life is also examined. Finally, two new phenomena that raise important challenges to the practice of democracy are investigated: globalization and new communications technologies.

The audit does not include studies devoted to the status of particular groups of Canadians. Rather than separate out Aboriginals, women, new Canadians, and others, these groups are treated together with all Canadians throughout the audit. For example, the studies on courts, federalism, governments and the electoral system all examine questions of particular relevance to the status of Aboriginal Canadians. They do so, however, within the context of their overall study and not as part of a separate investigation into the status of various constituent groups of Canadians.

Some would argue that economic and social justice issues should be included, others that there must be a robust consideration of individual rights and liberties and they are not wrong. Our examination is not exhaustive. Indeed, Canadian democracy is a vibrant force the status of which can never be fully captured at one time. Nonetheless, the areas we considered are inclusive of many of the pressing issues currently facing Canadian democracy. We do not expect to have the final word on this topic, but rather hope to encourage others to pursue similar avenues of enquiry.

The Product

The Audit has produced nine monographs, all published by the University of British Columbia Press. The title and chapter headings of each volume are listed below. Each of the volumes uses the benchmarks of participation, inclusiveness and responsiveness to structure their assessment of a particular institution or component of Canadian democracy. Each volume also synthesizes the existing academic literature on their subject and in most cases uses findings from new research to evaluate reform proposals. While not a wholly normative enterprise, one of the objectives of the Audit project is to encourage discussion of ways to improve Canadian democracy. We have found that consideration of reform proposals helps to inform this discussion.

The Audit volumes have been very well received. The books have already been widely adopted for use in both undergraduate and graduate level courses in political science and Canadian studies departments. Several departments have created new courses structured around the

Audit project in which all of the volumes are assigned readings. The volumes are purposely written in a very accessible way so that informed members of the public can benefit from them. There has been considerable interest in the project in the popular media and the Audit has been well received in the policy community.

Citizens, by Elisabeth Gidengil, Andre Blais, Neil Nevitte and Richard Nadeau.

- Auditing Democratic Citizenship
- How Much Attention Do Canadians Pay to Politics?
- What Do Canadians Know about Politics?
- Can Canadians Get By with Less Information?
- How Much Do Canadians Participate in Politics?
- How Civic Minded Are Canadians?
- Engaging Canadians

Elections, by John Courtney

- The Rules of the Electoral Game
- Who Can Vote?
- From Gerrymandering to Independence: Territorially Based Districts
- Registering Voters
- Electoral Machinery: From Partisanship to Professionalism
- Representation, Plurality Voting and the Democratic Deficit
- Auditing Canada's Electoral System

Political Parties, by William Cross

- Auditing Canada's Political Parties
- Political Parties As Membership Organizations
- Policy Study and Development
- Candidate Selection
- Selection of Party Leaders
- Parties and Election Campaigning
- Money and Politics
- Four Proposals for Party Reform

Advocacy Groups, by Lisa Young and Joanna Everitt

- Advocacy Groups and Canadian Democracy
- Perspectives on Advocacy Groups and Democracy
- Who Participates in Advocacy Groups?
- The Internal Life of Groups
- Which Interests and Identities Are Mobilized?
- Talking to Governments
- Advocacy Group Involvement in Elections, Litigation, and Protests
- Who Prevails?
- Enhancing the Democratic Role of Advocacy Groups

Federalism, by Jennifer Smith

- Auditing Federalism in Canada
- Federalism and Democracy
- Canadian Federalism
- Democratic Audit of Inclusiveness in the Federal System
- Democratic Audit of Participation in the Federal System
- Democratic Audit of Responsiveness in the Federal System
- The Democratic Audit and Change in the Federal System
- The Need for Change

Legislatures, by David Docherty

- A Democratic Audit of Canadian Legislatures
- Who Represents Canadians?
- Roles in the Assembly
- Constituency Work
- Opportunities in the Assembly
- Scrutiny and the Size of Legislatures
- The Legislative Process
- What Legislatures Should (and Should Not) Do

Cabinets and First Ministers, by Graham White

- The Scope and Criteria for the Audit
- Cabinet Government in Canada: An Executive Summary
- The First Minister as Autocrat?
- Public Participation in Cabinet Processes?
- Democracy through Cabinet Structure and Process?
- Democracy in the Elected Dictatorship?

Courts, by Ian Greene

- Canada's Courts in Context
- Public Participation in the Justice System
- Inclusiveness
- Responsiveness of Courts to Expectations: Independence, Behaviour, and Administration
- Responsiveness of Judicial Decisions to Canadian Democracy
- The Courts and Democracy

Communication Technology, by Darin Barney

- Democracy, Technology and Communication in Canada
- The Politics of Communication Technology in Canada
- Communication Technology, Globalization and Nationalism in Canada
- Technologies of Political Communication in Canada
- Digital Divides
- The Question

Notes

1. *Citizens' Forum on Canada's Future: Report to the People and Government of Canada* (Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1991), 135.
 2. *Report of the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing*, volume 2, (Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1991), 229.
 3. For more on this, see R. Kenneth Carty, William Cross and Lisa Young, *Rebuilding Canadian Party Politics* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 28-29.
 4. See, Alan Cairns, "An Election to be Remembered: Canada 1993," in *Canadian Public Policy*, volume 3 (1994); and F. Leslie Seidle, "The Angry Citizenry: Examining Representation and Responsiveness in Government," in *Policy Options*, volume 15:6 (1994).
 5. The idea for a 'democratic audit' of Canada comes in part from similar projects conducted in both Sweden and the United Kingdom. For more on these projects see Michele Micheletti, "The Democratic Audit of Sweden," in *Viewpoint Sweden*, No. 18 (1998); and, David Beetham, "The Idea of Democratic Audit in Comparative Perspective," in *Parliamentary Affairs*, volume 52:4 (1999).
 6. Glenn Munn, F.L. Garcia and Charles Woelfel, *Encyclopedia of Banking and Finance*, 9th ed., (Rolling Meadows, Illinois: Bankers Publishing Company, 1991).
 7. This approach is consistent with the definition of democracy found in Robert Dahl's classic work *Polyarchy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).
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8. Members of the Democratic Audit Team are: Darin Barney, McGill University; André Blais, Université de Montreal; R. Kenneth Carty, University of British Columbia; John Courtney, University of Saskatchewan; William Cross, Carleton University; David Docherty, Wilfrid Laurier University; Joanna Everitt, University of New Brunswick; Elisabeth Gidengil, McGill University; Ian Greene, York University; Richard Nadeau, Université de Montréal; Neil Nevitte, University of Toronto; Richard Sigurdson, University of Manitoba; Jennifer Smith, Dalhousie University; Frank Strain, Mount Allison University; Michael Tucker, Mount Allison University; Graham White, University of Toronto; Lisa Young, University of Calgary.