



April 3, 2008

Now is the time for all good people (and rascals) to come to the aid of (one) party (or another)

What this town needs is a good Conservative party. That's a sentence I never thought I would write. But it is true. Municipal government in this city has dissolved into a behind-the-scenes old-boys club in which deal-making, rather than visionary thinking, dominates.

For example, the recent budget appears to have been cobbled together at the last minute, presented in a form that no one can understand, and was shaped by a single priority: continuation of the decade-long property tax freeze.

In a healthy political system voters who did not like the budget could simply vote the rascals out. However, because there are no political parties in Winnipeg, it takes a truly dedicated citizen to figure out who the rascals are. For example, who, aside from the mayor, is responsible for the budget? Councillors who voted for it can always say that they were supporting those measures of which they approved, while holding their nose when supporting the rest of the document.

Winnipeggers have never had a true party system at city hall. In 1919, following that year's general strike, the city's business community established the Citizens' League, which sponsored candidates in the 1920 municipal election. The League went through numerous

name changes, but it managed to control city hall for 64 years, until its final incarnation, the Independent Citizens Election Committee (ICEC) dissolved itself in 1983. Through its history, this organization stressed that it was not a political party but merely wanted to keep party politics out of city hall. In reality, it was dedicated to keeping labour-sponsored candidates, who ran under the banner of the Independent Labor Party and later the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation and the New Democratic Party, from winning a majority of seats. The Citizens' League members voted as a bloc, caucused prior to council meetings to determine committee appointments, and controlled the affairs of city hall.

For years, critics of the Citizens' League and its successors called on it to acknowledge that it was a political party and recognize that there were the issues decided at city hall had a political dimension. (The Citizens had argued that there was no such thing as a left-wing or right-wing way to lay a sewer. While this might be true, there is a left- and right-wing perspective on which neighbourhood gets connected to the sewer system first.)

These critics enjoyed a considerable degree of satisfaction when the ICEC ran out of



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gas in 1983. But the municipal New Democratic Party was not able to capitalize on the collapse of the ICEC. Instead within a few years it too formally abandoned the municipal field. Although the party still endorses and supports a number of candidates in each election, it does not function as a political party at the municipal level. Winnipeg into the Nineties (WIN) was an effective, but short-lived political alternative.

Sadly, in Winnipeg not only is there no way to identify which rascals should be thrown out, there is not even a gang of alternate rascals in waiting. In other words, this town also needs a good left-wing municipal political party.

Over 55 years ago, Charles Adrian, a U.S. academic, identified what he saw as the major failings of the so-called non-partisan approach to municipal politics. He concluded that:

- Nonpartisanship encourages the avoidance of issues of policy in campaigns. "Seldom does a nonpartisan candidate take a firm, widely-publicized stand upon the important issues of the day."
- Nonpartisanship tends to frustrate protest voting. "If the voter sees to 'turn the rascals out' he has no guide for doing so."
- Nonpartisanship produces a legislative body with a relatively high percentage of experienced members, making for conservatism. Given that elections are not fought on issues, and there are no organized parties, name recognition gives incumbents an undue advantage.
- There is no collective responsibility in a nonpartisan body. "Without collective responsibility and a well-knit internal organization, a legislative body is likely to be lacking in a collective, comprehensive program."

It all sounds too familiar. The American political philosopher John Dewey recognized that the solution to the problems of democracy is

more democracy. Sadly, most of the solutions that have been attempted or proposed for Winnipeg city hall have involved less democracy.

The Filmon government reduced the number of councillors and allowed the mayor, rather than the council to pick the members of the Executive Policy Committee. This makes sense in a provincial system, where the Premier runs as leader of a political party with a clear platform.

At the municipal level, the mayor simply tries to cobble together a majority by buying the support of a near-majority of council when he appoints them to EPC. Another proposed solution, term limits, is also fundamentally undemocratic. At the federal and provincial level, where the party system prevails, when voters decide to throw the rascals out it is not uncommon for long-serving incumbents to go down to defeat.

Finally, a party system would mean that the candidates for mayor would be responsible to the parties that nominated them than rather than being self-selected (or selected by back-roomers with deep pockets).

So, I say it again: what this town needs is a good Conservative Party, if only to give Winnipeggers the opportunity of throwing the rascals out.

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