

COMOX VALLEY CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 25

Drowning in Democracy

There is an old saying that is often applied to climate change: “*We are drowning in information but starved for knowledge*” It means that scientists are drowning us with facts and figures about climate change but not providing us with enough knowledge about how to deal with it.

When I hear that saying I always focus on the word “drowning”. Twice in my life I came very close to drowning. The word popped into my mind as I was thinking about climate change and our western democratic forms of government. They seem unable to deal with climate change. They are drowning and not realizing it. So what to do?

Let us imagine that we are in a sailboat, we get caught in a storm, our mast snaps, and we are pushed way out to sea,. When the storm is over we are sitting motionless and we are in trouble. To make matters worse, there are some sharks circling around us and water is flooding in because of a leak in the bow that we never got around to fixing. In desperate straits we get on the radio and send out a distress signal.

Our signal is picked up by three boats all of them a couple of miles away but in different directions. One belongs to a good friend, the second one belongs to an enemy and the third one belongs to someone we don't even know. Which one do we want to come and rescue us?

The answer is obvious. We don't care who comes to save us, even our enemy, as long as they get to us in time. What we don't want is an extended radio conversation among the other boat owners to achieve a consensus about who should come to rescue us. We just want to be saved.

We tend to think that consensus is what our western democratic political governments are supposed to achieve. It is supposed to come out of our right to vote. But that is not happening especially in the era of identity politics. We see ourselves more as Liberals, Conservatives, NDPers or Greens, and in the U.S. as the Republicans or Democrats. Our elections have become zero sum game: there are winners and losers. Consensus is out the window.

The winners are happy but their priority is not to build a consensus with the losers—except in a minority government. It is to stay in power. The losers are often angry and bitter. Their priority is not to achieve consensus with the winners. It is to become the winners. Everyone is playing the game without realizing that the game is fixed. In its present form it will not help us deal with our climate changing world.

Climate change is a game-changer. It's like the storm in the ocean that threatens the continued existence of all boats and all political parties. It has actually destroyed the zero-sum game because there will be no winners. There will only be losers unless we figure out what to do about climate change and, as our scientists have warned us, do it now. There is a significant leak in the ship of state and we have to notice it and fix it now.

In the past some citizens seem to "fix" their democracies by becoming dictatorships. That won't work for us. And a recent example of the vulnerability of the existing democratic system is causing great concern. Donald Trump has managed to take the largest democracy in the world and lead it in new and unimaginable directions—miles away from any kind of consensus. That won't work either. So what to do?.

First, working at the community level we must determine our own values that we expect our government to foster. What values do we hold dear in this this radically changing world? What values do we want to pass on to our children and future generations? This will require extensive conversations.

Next, we must start where most other democratic governments started, with a critique of the present system. Can it deal with our values? This is where both the Canadian democracy and the American democracy started when folks wanted to get out from under the oppressive yoke of the British government. It did not respond to their values.

Finally we must reconstruct or radically change the governing structure to make sure it responds to our values.

Easy to say, not easy to do...and a heads-up. The kind of changes we are trying to bring about will be like blood in the water for many of those who control the levers of power. They will do all they can to stop us.

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