

Publication: Globe and Mail

Date: Wednesday, November 8, 2000

Section: Comment

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Canada's election debates should not be limited to the establishment parties, says Green Party Leader JOAN RUSSOW

November 8 2000

You will not see or hear from the Green Party in the French television debates this evening, or the English debates tomorrow, so you won't hear about a great many issues that should be fundamental to this election.

Ideally, an election is an opportunity for all registered political parties to inform the public about issues. When the Governor-General, at the request of the Prime Minister, agrees to dissolve Parliament, the slate is presumably wiped clean. Members of Parliament lose their seats and all registered parties become equal.

The reality, however, is that a committee of media members has already determined that coverage, including participation in televised leaders' debates, is to be based on whether a party has elected members to the previous House of Commons. The result is that the media determine what parties are "of worth."

Ironically, the media's own regulator, the CRTC, sets forth that "the broadcaster does not enjoy the position of a benevolent censor who is able to give the public only what it 'should' know. Nor is it the broadcaster's role to decide in advance which candidates are worthy of broadcast time." The CRTC regulations also state that the public's right to be informed on all issues and candidates "is a quintessential one for the effective functioning of a democracy, particularly at election time."

The First Past the Post: We deserve to be heard

Posted by Joan Russow

Monday, 23 November 2015 12:04 - Last Updated Thursday, 04 October 2018 08:28

One issue that the public has a "right to be informed" about is the serious health, environment, equity and economic consequences of genetically engineered foods and crops. None of the five parties "of worth," when in power federally or provincially, took the opportunity to prohibit the testing or growing of these foods.

The federal Conservatives were negligent for initiating trials of genetically engineered foods and crops back in 1988. The Liberals permitted more trials and then approved genetically engineered corn, canola oil, potatoes, tomatoes and squash. The NDP in Saskatchewan established an "innovation centre," partnering with Monsanto and other agribusiness companies. The Canadian Alliance's provincial partners in Alberta and Ontario and the Bloc Québécois's partner in Quebec have permitted trials and condoned the growing of these crops.

I predict that you will not hear discussion in this week's debates on any of the following issues:

Moving away from the overconsumptive model of development and creating a more meaningful measure of economic growth that does not discount disasters and environmental degradation;

Addressing changes resulting from globalization, downsizing, and other economic disruptions to help affected workers and communities;

Withdrawing from NAFTA, and dismantling the WTO;

Addressing climate change through substantially reducing greenhouse-gas emissions and through conserving carbon sinks, such as bogs and old growth forests;

Moving away from car dependency and promoting public transportation;

Ending the reimbursement of 50 per cent of election expenses from the public purse by candidates who receive 15 per cent of the popular vote;

Conserving biodiversity on public and private lands;

Reducing the military budget and military contracts and transferring the savings into health care, education, transportation, and housing;

Decriminalizing marijuana and instituting harm-reduction programs to address drug addiction;

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Converting agribusiness to chemical-free organic agriculture;

Banning and phasing out uranium mining, and civil nuclear reactors, and prohibiting support for the nuclear-arms industry; phasing out fossil fuels and promoting solar, wind, and low-impact energy alternatives;

Addressing the disproportionate amount of taxes paid by individuals compared to corporations.

An election should be an opportunity to discuss new ideas, not just to recycle faded political rhetoric. How are we to know if Canadians have strong opinions on any of these issues if they are not a part of the officially sanctioned debating process, and if the leaders of the major parties aren't forced to address them on TV?

The CRTC regulations are fair but unfairly applied; the Elections Act is substantively unfair but scrupulously applied. In Canada, the parties "of worth" were all elected under the "First Past the Post" system. This system has been largely discarded by the world's other democracies, as it often results in citizens facing the dilemma of voting for the party they want less to prevent the one they want least from being elected. This system encourages "strategic voting," and in turn results in the election of fewer political parties, women, First Nations and minorities. MPs are elected through this unfair system and the media then perpetuate the cycle.

Meanwhile, in the United States, Green Party candidate Ralph Nader, a credible candidate with fresh ideas for America, was also barred from televised debates. The bipartisan Commission on Presidential Debates ruled that he didn't meet its criteria of having a reasonable chance of winning. Mr. Nader maintains, probably correctly, that he would easily surpass those criteria if he were allowed to debate. He is suing the CPD, saying it has "sowed the seeds of its own future political destruction." To replace it, Mr. Nader calls for a People's Debate Commission in which unions and community organizations will sponsor numerous debates of varying formats.

There is actually a precedent for a Green Party of Canada leader to be included in a televised debate along with the five parties "of worth." During the last federal election, in 1997, I was invited to participate as the sixth party leader in a debate on First Nations issues. I read through a 5,000 page Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal Issues, and then flew to Ottawa to debate the other leaders. When I arrived, I found out that the other leaders were not willing to discuss First Nations issues and the Royal Commission

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Report. Instead, they sent along a surrogate and a sheet of paper containing a statement with their photos.

As a result of this experience, I concluded that a better format than the current debates would be to produce multiple televised discussions on various issues among all the party leaders. Any leader of any party would be welcome to debate each topic. Not all leaders would choose to discuss every issue, as was the case with the 1997 First Nations debate, but this system would guarantee "the citizens' right to be informed" on the issues.

The federal election in Canada and the U.S. election with Mr. Nader are currently demonstrating the need for fundamental electoral reform and fair coverage in both Canada and the United States. We must move beyond the current system and strive for more inclusive public debate. Joan Russow is leader of the Green Party of Canada