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Immigrant Services Shuswap

Shuswap Community Conversations

Conversation 3: "Social Democracy"

January 14th, 2015

Social Democracy means different things to different people. It is essential to establish the meaning of the term before there can be productive community conversation on the subject. "Democracy" defines a process whereby the needs and wants of every individual are considered and reflected in public decision making. Athenian democracy was one where every (male) citizen attended a conclave and determined a course of action by means of persuasion and voting. Modern democracies, however, are primarily representative democracies wherein citizens elect others to represent them in the discussion and decision making process. The process, itself, varies widely and the outcomes are seen to be more or less reflective of the wants and needs of all the citizens. "Social" denotes matters affecting human welfare.

Social Democracy denotes a society wherein every citizen gets to participate in and benefit from the wealth and services of the entire community. Social democracies support the use of democratic means to achieve social outcomes. It entails the use of affirmative action whereby governing bodies use their powers to devise and implement procedure and outcomes that serve the needs of the entire society.

Social Equity is not the same as social equality. Communist states advocate social equality, where every citizen is valued equally and receives equal recompense for their labor. Social equity, meanwhile, is more a process than an outcome. Social equity involves creating and maintaining equality of opportunity for everyone. Whether an individual is able to achieve his or her full potential, in a socially equitable society, depends on the unimpeded choice of every individual to capitalize on social opportunities open to everyone. Societies where some individuals are not equally entitled to opportunities for promotion, education, and higher wages because of glass ceilings, unaffordable tuition fees, racial profiling, and the like, are socially inequitable.

It is questionable whether there can be social democracy without there first being social equity. Should everyone have the right to use their individual gifts in to achieve their full potential? At what point does disparity in incomes become such that while some individuals can no longer afford to try others no longer need to try? At what point does the cost of campaigning for public office become the sole purview of the rich? Is democracy high jacked when public opinion is shaped public advertising? At what point does the lack of language facility prevent some from accessing public services or participating in public discourse? When does a lack of financial resources become a systemic form of discrimination preventing some children from participating in sports, some immigrants from integrating into a community, some students from having access to important educational supports, and some mentally ill or physically handicapped individual from finding employment or securing adequate shelter?

Vision and Goals: Historically, Canada has been a socially progressive e country. Social programs like Employment Insurance, Family Allowance, Senior’s Pension, Canada Health Care, and Canada Student Loans, serve as a safety net protecting individuals from devastation. There is an ongoing debate over whether we should sustain and/or extend social programs to include prescription drugs and child care or whether we should scale back social programming in order that government can reduce taxes.

Social Services: Is it possible to build a social democracy – creating conditions where everyone can benefit from the work and services available -- without lifting up the socially marginalized? That is, in part, the role of social service providers. The goal is not to create a state of permanent dependence but to assist while providing the skills required living independently. There is need to: teach computer literacy while assisting with accessing on-line opportunities, provide language training while assisting with spoken and written tasks, advocating and making enquiries on behalf of the disadvantaged while demonstrating how they might advocate on their own behalf.

Volunteer Services: Individuals unable to achieve their full potential are handicapped in some manner. Systemic discrimination occurs whenever an individual is side lined for lack of language, inability afford associated fees, personal appearance, limited contacts, and the like. Volunteers make a difference by providing assistance that compensates for weaknesses that otherwise would inhibit or compromise one’s chances of participating or benefitting.

Summary: A social democracy is one that strives of provide for the wants and needs of all its citizens. As long as socially marginalized individuals are unable to bring their perspective, wants and needs to be part of the social conversation that determines public policy, there can be no social democracy.

Bernie Desrosiers

NOTE: To respond to this discussion paper, go to FORUM at <http://www.welcomeshuswap.com/>

hi Bernie

Tonight was a very powerful reminder for me of the importance of community building! I’m sure Erik will share, but one of the attendees was a man who has a job but no home. It’s his estimation that there are 200 homeless people in Salmon Arm. The rest of the group was shocked and saddened by this. We all left more humble and grateful than when we arrived. Of that, I am sure.

Thank you for all that you do.

Louise

**Louise Wallace, a local business owner and city councillor, sent this email after attending Community Conversations on January 14th, and permitted the recipient to reprint and distribute her comment.*